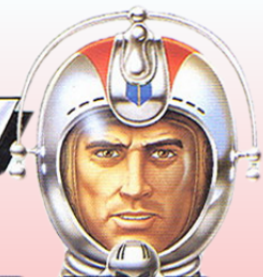


PERRY PERRY RHODAN



THE WORLD'S GREATEST SPACE FICTION SERIES



SECRET MISSION: MOLUK

William Voltz

#92

Perry Rhodan

No. 92

Secret Mission: Moluk

*Shipwrecked Terrans experience the horrors of the Moluk Desert –
20,000 Light Years from home . . .*

William Voltz

PERRY RHODAN speaks:

“Our position is desperate.”

“Earth’s position is known.”

“The Solar Imperium is too weak to repulse any earnest attack.”

“Atlan has his own problems.”

A strong ally must be found. Contact with the Molecular Deformers could boomerang but it is a desperate risk that must be taken.

“I would make a deal with the devil himself to save mankind!” declares Rhodan.

And so, the machinery is set in motion that results in – **SECRET MISSION: MOLUK...**

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created by Walter Ernsting and Karl-Herbert Scheer.

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CAN YOU KEEP A SECRET SO CAN THE FOLLOWING –

Walter Scoobey – First Officer of the spaceship *MEXICO*

Col. Marcus Everson, Lt. Edward Bellinger and **Dr. Morton** – Medics aboard the *MEXICO*

Walter Hunter – Mathematician

Pensteven – Astronomer

Eiji Tanaka – Astronaut

Poul Weiss – Biologist

Antonio Landi – Radioman

Dr. Llewellyn – Part of medical station

Ferranion – Technician

Mataal – A false gladiator; a molecular transformite (shape changer)

Murgut – A Green

Napoleon (Npln) – A birdlike native of Moluk

Allan D. Mercant – Chief of Terra's Solar Defense

Carmene – Navigator

Sammy Goldstein – Mutant; telepath

Werner Sternal, Chaney, Edwards, Ogieva (a black), Ben, Dealcour and **Sgt. Delaney** – They participate in small parts

And – **PERRY RHODAN**, Administrator of Solarian affairs and Peace Enforcer in the solar system and beyond

1.

POSITION DESPERATE

Cybernetic machines – There are people who can suffer inferiority complexes just by working on them.

They sit at the evaluation unit of a calculating machine and cannot accept the fact that a positronicon can work faster and produce more logical arguments and conclusions than a human brain ever could. Such persons simply forget that *they* are the ones who give the robot brain the *right* data and ask the *right* questions.

As yet this danger did not exist for Walt Hunter. Hunter's antipathy towards positronicons was due mainly to the fact they forced him to work during the time he was on duty. Otherwise he always approached the machines with displeasure and apathy.

One of the psychologists in Solar Defense had termed Hunter phlegmatic, which is to say lazy and sluggish. The mathematician's plumpness seemed to bear out the headdoctor's thesis.

At that moment Hunter received a computer card by way of the pneumatic post over his seat. He picked it out of the capsule.

"Hey, Ben!" he called bad-temperedly.

A man sitting behind him and somewhat to one side got up and came over to him. Hunter waved the card.

"Guess what they're up to this time!" he said.

Ben looked at the card as though it were a well-cooked steak with onions. "Eppan," was all he said, clicking his tongue.

Hunter dismissed the outburst of enthusiasm of his colleague with a resentful grumbling. "Naturally," he said unhappily. "The Solar Defense's entire positronic evaluation laboratory is on the hunt for molecular transformites. At Mercants order." His cheeks inflated for a moment, giving him the appearance of an overfed hamster. "The way I heard it, good ol' Mercant had nothing better to do than send a fast cruiser with two mutants to Eppan in order to find out if this mysterious Mataal had left any traces behind."

He manipulated some of the positronic brain's controls and instrument lights lit up.

Ben bent over Hunter's shoulder. "Mercant's idea was thoroughly justified," he said. "The mutants found data in Mataal's palace that will tell us more about other molecular transformite spaceships."

Relays clicked, a humming sounded and Hunter put the computer card into the slit of the programming unit. "Molecular transformite spaceships," he repeated. "Now there's a mouthful for you!"

"In the current situation," Ben explained in the tones of a lecturer, "there is only one possibility for the Solar Imperium: winning strong friends."

Hunter snorted contemptuously. "I can just see Rhodan walking hand in hand through the streets of Terrania with these lovely creatures. You know the kind of trouble Everson had with Mataal. If Goldstein had not been able to free himself from the shape changer's psychic hold back then, we probably wouldn't be sitting here now."

The evaluations made to this time had already given the specialists of Solar Defense some information to go on. The mutants ordered to Eppan by Alan D. Mercant had brought along tiny metal leaves that they had discovered in searching Mataal's quarters. The false gladiator's house had stood untouched by the Eppanites themselves for they were convinced that their matador would one day return.

It quickly developed that the thin leaves were covered with notes of some sort. With the help of translators and special positronicons, the specialists were able to translate the alien language. The first results showed that in addition to Mataal's unfortunate ship a second ship would soon take off from the unknown homeworld of the molecular transformites. Mataal's report indicated nothing of the position of his native solar system. On the other hand, there were justified hopes of finding out to what planet the second ship was destined.

"Don't crack your brains worrying about the politics of your superiors," Ben said to Hunter. "Both Springers and Druufs have already barged into our solar system recently and you can't say that they have treated us very kindly. If we succeed in finding the shape changers and making them our allies, we'll be able to feel a lot more secure."

Hunter's wish for security seemed to have been extinguished years before, for he only smiled ironically. The positronicon interrupted their discussion. The evaluation sector was setting itself into operation. Hunter pressed several buttons. The machine was now in the process of turning the data they had fed into it into a logical conclusion.

"It concerns location determining," Hunter commented. "Mercant would

like to know with what certainty the machine can calculate the cosmic position of the planet to which the second shape changer ship is flying.” Almost lovingly he caressed the plastic edge of the positronicon.

Two hours later he held the results in his hands. It was of astounding precision even for a robot computing-machine of that sort.

The mechanical brain had determined the planetary destination with 95.639% certainty.

The man’s large bald head was wreathed by a crown of gold-blond hair. The man was small and his face showed a good-natured expression.

His was a lively, slender figure, radiating optimism from its very being. He stopped in front of a broad door. “Mercant here,” he said into the wall microphone. “May I come in?”

“By all means,” sounded a commanding voice.

Allan D. Mercant knew that man with whom he would be standing face to face in a few seconds would be greatly troubled with worry. He opened the door and walked in.

“Hello,” Perry Rhodan greeted him, smiling weakly.

Although it was a hot day in August, the Administrator wore his uniform in accordance with regulations. This man, a legend even in his own lifetime, would never exploit any advantage he had over his men. Rhodan sat behind a desk. At a considerably smaller desk some distance away a young cadet had leaped up and snapped to attention at Mercant’s appearance.

Mercant nodded to him and the young man sat down. In his face was something of the breathlessness that affects normal people when encountering famous people. Rhodan and Mercant... Later, the cadet would consider himself unusually lucky in having been in the same room with those men, once he’d had a chance to think about it.

For a moment, Rhodan’s and Mercant’s glances met in mutual respect and genuine friendship.

Mercant laid a briefcase on the desk.

“You may be seated,” said the Administrator. In the presence of third parties they were formal to one another.

The Defense chief thanked Rhodan and sat down. “It concerns Eppan,” he said, pointing to the briefcase. “You no doubt remember the commando mission led by Col. Everson, sir. The young telepath Goldstein rescued the guppy crew then.”

Rhodan’s angular, almost gaunt face assumed a thoughtful expression.

“You mean the affair with those uncanny creatures who could influence and change the molecular structure of matter with their paranormal abilities?”

“Quite right, sir,” Mercant confirmed.

The cadet, his writing forgotten, had bent far over his desk to listen. Mercant smiled slightly.

“I’ve brought along with me the results of the evaluations, which I’m sure will interest you,” the chief of Solar Defense continued calmly. “My men in the positronic department have found out some things that I consider meaningful.”

It was typical for Mercant to refer to his men in a discussion. He never would have thought of passing any successes off as the result of his own abilities alone.

Rhodan pulled the briefcase closer to him and opened it up. He read the papers over in silence for some time. Mercant did not disturb him. Suddenly Rhodan let out a low whistle.

“I see that your specialists have been able to calculate on which planet the molecular transformite ship must have landed. According to Mataal’s report, it’s a ship full of emigrants. If it arrived at its destination, then its passengers must still be there.”

Mercant’s expression showed satisfaction. “The solar system concerned lies close to the central sector of the galaxy,” he said. “It’s listed in the Arkon Star Catalogue as a green star, MEG-1453-AS-34. The distance to the Earth is around 20,000 light-years. The star which we call Greenol is orbited by six planets, all of which are considered uninhabited. The second planet is in question to us. One of the cyberneticists has already given it a name: Moluk.”

He leaned his small body forward and drew a green sheet of paper out of the briefcase, giving it to Rhodan.

“This is the report of the telepath Sammy Goldstein about the astounding paranormal abilities of the molecular transformite who stowed away aboard Everson’s guppy. The MD was able to do it in all openness because the Colonel thought he was an Eppanite native.”

Rhodan folded up the paper and drummed on the desktop with his index finger. “I know what you’re thinking,” he said to Mercant.

The face of the man across from him showed poorly-hidden surprise. However, before Mercant could interrupt, Rhodan went on. “To be frank, our position is desperate. The Earth’s position is known to all the space-

faring races. The Solar Imperium is still too weak to repulse any earnest attack. Atlan has his own problems and can't support us in the way I'm sure he would like to. Quite the opposite: he's going to need our help very much and very often. Any relatively strong fleet could risk an invasion and we would not be able to successfully defend ourselves. That would be fatal. Even the thousand ships that Atlan generously supplied us to make up for our heavy losses are not enough to give us absolute security. True, the assembly lines on Terra and Luna are rolling day and night and the mass production of spaceships of all kinds is running at full speed but the potential superiority of any and every enemy would be too much for us at this time." He paused, his expression grave with concern. "I would make a deal with the devil himself to save mankind. We must leave no stone unturned in trying to find a strong ally. Our goal must be finding powerful friends who will stand together with us in strengthening the Imperium."

"That's my opinion too," Mercant agreed. "The attempt to make contact with the shape changers might boomerang on us but we must risk it."

"Please leave your data here for me," Rhodan said. "I'll go over it more closely. It would be better if I discussed this with different friends, too."

"May I make a suggestion?" Mercant asked politely.

"Of course," said the tall man behind the desk.

"Send Everson," Mercant said. "And Goldstein."

Their simultaneous smiles were shadowed by concern: concern for the further development and continued existence of the race whose comet-like climb had been suddenly halted.

The human race.

2.

SHIPWRECKED ON MOLUK

When Poul Weiss leaned over the protective railing of the platform, he could see without difficulty to the other takeoff sites. The clouds of an air-clearing storm had cleared away and the sun was reflected in the polished metal plates of the spaceships. Down below, Weiss saw the mechanics inspecting the hydraulic telescoping landing legs of the spacesphere. They crawled around in their white suits like large beetles.

The gantry elevator came to a stop near Weiss, and Werner Sternal stepped out on the platform before the large hatch. His pocket was, as usual, filled far beyond its comfortable capacity.

“Have the important people already assembled?” he inquired.

“We *are* the important people,” Weiss answered with a glance at Sternal’s load. “Unless of course you want to apply that term to that unbearable civilian Dr. Morton, who went on board a few minutes ago.”

Sternal disappeared in the hatchway of the brand new State Class cruiser. The ultrafast *MEXICO* had, like all ships of its class, a diameter of 100 meters. 150 men were necessary to guide this fabulous ship through the cosmos.

Weiss was aware of the special mission that they had to fulfil. Under the command of Col. Marcus Everson they would materialize in space after three transitions 20,000 light-years from Earth. They were to land on the second planet of the star Greenol and search for the molecular transformites that must be living there according to the results of the Solar Defense’s positronical calculations.

Weiss thought only reluctantly of the experiences he had lived through in company with his comrades aboard the guppy. He could not imagine at all how he could come to terms with a being like Mataal without suffering disadvantages.

He saw Everson and Scoobey coming across the landing field. Ten men from the old guppy crew would go on board the *MEXICO*. Thanks to their experiences they would constitute an elite among the men of the cruiser.

The elevator glided downwards. Weiss left the platform with a last look around at the surrounding landscape. “Being a space traveler means always having to say goodbye,” he thought. Nevertheless he could not remember

ever in his life wanting to do anything different than step into an airlock shortly before being carried aloft into a void that knew neither end nor beginning.

* * * *

The *MEXICO* emerged from hyperspace, bringing an end to its phantom-like flight that permitted it to cross light-years. The effects of the distortion-effect faded away. Poul Weiss sat up. He rubbed his eyes.

The loudspeaker crackled. "The third transition has been terminated." It was Everson's voice. "We now find ourselves in the solar system that was our destination. We are now 170 million kilometers from the star Greenol. The planet Moluk, to which we will be flying, is now on the other side of the sun from us. For the time being we will limit ourselves to a remote investigation of the system in order to check the information given by the Arkon Catalogue."

Weiss swung a leg off the pneumocouch.

Pentsteven, one of the astronomers, entered the small cabin without knocking. His mouselike eyes focused on the yawning Weiss. "This is the first time I've flown a mission like this one," he announced.

"So?" asked Weiss without interest.

"Why doesn't the commander go any closer to Moluk? He can't find out much from this position."

Besides having the understandable curiosity of a greenhorn, Pentsteven also seemed to have been fitted out with an ample portion of obstinacy.

"Up to now," Weiss explained, "this system has never been visited by mankind. We hardly know anything at all about the six planets. It would be utterly senseless to land somewhere trusting entirely to our luck. While we were strolling around the second planet, it might happen that someone on the fourth planet would send a small armada to attack us. That's why we're obtaining an overall view of the system before narrowing ourselves down to luck alone."

"Naturally," said Pentsteven simply.

Weiss glanced at him in disapproval.

"How long will it be before we land on Moluk?" astronomer wanted to know. "For me, all of this is really exciting."

Weiss' face took on a dark red color, which made Pentsteven decide to quickly leave the room.

When Weiss went into the control and navigation room somewhat later, the specialists had already begun with the evaluation of the first batch of raw data. New data was constantly being fed into the ship's positronicon.

"Conditions on the two outer planets are similar to those we know on Pluto," Marcus Everson was saying. "It can hardly be expected that they would support any life. The innermost planet can also be excluded because it comes so close to Greenol that much of its surface probably becomes molten. Planets two, three and four remain as possible."

Scoobey, the First Officer, said: "So far we haven't been able to detect any sign of life."

Weiss noticed how in his nervousness Pentstevan was perforating a star map with his drawing compass. Sammy Goldstein, the telepath, stood close to the intercom unit. His young face looked tense. He did not belong to the first rank of mutants but his experiences with Mataal had made him seem the right man for this mission.

Everson spoke again. "In any event, we'll be flying to Moluk. I'm convinced that the evaluation of the available information by the specialists in Defense was the correct one."

Weiss heard these words with rather mixed feelings.

He understood Rhodan's aspirations of winning allies. However, he wondered if it might not be better for the crew of the *MEXICO* if they were unable to find any molecular transformites.

Everything has two sides, Weiss thought. It's like flip-ping a coin: you don't know which side it'll land on.

* * * *

After 12 hours of Earthly time, Col. Everson gave the order to fly to Moluk. The investigations of the other planets had produced no results that would cause any apprehensions.

Moluk required 38 hours and 18 minutes to rotate once on its axis. The slow rate of rotation resulted in atmospheric disturbances since the night side cooled down over the long period of darkness while increasingly warm air streamed into the cooler areas with considerable force.

Everson, whose caution had become almost proverbial in the long years he had spent in the service, directed the *MEXICO* towards the night side. The various remote sensors showed success on their first deployment:

Moluk was inhabited!

The radio surveillance team took their posts at once but did not pick up any signals indicating radio traffic. The radio men were reduced almost to tears by the disturbances in their equipment caused by the atmosphere in motion below but there were no signs of any sort of message transmittal system built and organized by intelligent beings.

“if there are in fact technically advanced creatures here,” Scoobey said, “then there must be some indications that would point to it.”

“There’s nothing else for us to do but examine that planet down there one more time,” Everson told his men, “and this time from the ground up.”

Locating and measuring devices were put into full operation.

Moluk offered space travelers a warm layover if they were ever to land there. It was a world with large deserts, water-poor and covered only by natural, narrow strips of vegetation. The astronomers spoke of an average temperature of almost 42° Celsius on the day side.

“And that’s in the shade,” PentSteven told a moaning Weiss.

Even so, the air was breathable. Its oxygen content was not as high as on the Earth. Measurements and analyses showed large amounts of noble gases.

Sandstorms, dust hurricanes and dry thunderstorms followed on one another’s heels.

Goldstein, the mutant, picked up vibrations from primitive life forms but not even he found any sign of the paranormal superbeings.

In another 48 hours all possible means of observing the planet had been tried. At length Everson gave the order for the *MEXICO* to land on the night side of Moluk.

His face impassive, Marcus Everson looked at the viewing screen in front of him. Supported by the gravity-blocking screen of the antigrav field, the cruiser floated slowly towards the surface of the planet. Everson had decided against a landing with roaring engines. The bright glare of the retro-beams would have been visible from a considerable distance in the night.

The altimeter showed 142 meters.

To Everson’s left sat Carmene, the navigator. His scarred face and black eyes were an odd contrast to the control panel.

It happened 34 meters above the ground.

All of a sudden the fist of a giant seemed to clutch for Everson. His stomach became a wrung-out mass, causing nausea and dizziness.

Although it happened within a space of a few seconds, he had time to think:
The anti grav field has broken down!

The impact came in the same moment. Its force was enough to throw the colonel out of his seat. He felt himself lifted into the air. He raised his arms instinctively to protect himself. Even while he was still sailing across the control room, the lights went out. Someone cried out in the darkness.

Everson struck the ship's computer. A stabbing pain bored into his right shoulder.

One of the vidscreens broke with a violent crash. Glass clattered to the floor. Somewhere metal was cracking. Men's moaning came from out of the darkness. One of the spacemen crawled out from under the navigation table. Everson could hear his body rustling the maps hanging down from the tabletop.

He pushed himself a little farther along so that he could take hold of the projecting edge of the positronicon. Once he had done that, he pulled himself to his feet.

"Is anyone close to the emergency lights?" Everson asked in the gloom.

"I'm lying right *under* them," announced a voice. It was Scoobey who had spoken. "That big moose Bellinger is lying comfortably on my gut and keeping me from standing up," he added.

In spite of his pain, Everson had to grin. He could just imagine how the massive Bellinger would be crushing the small officer.

"I think I can get the lights on," called another voice.

Everson waited. Someone began to curse the antigrav field, softly by pointedly.

Then the lights came on again.

The control room was a scene of devastation. It looked as though a giant with an oversized whirlwind at his disposal had been at work creating disorder. Directly in front of Everson several men who had been flung together were occupied with disentangling themselves. Poul Weiss came out from under the map table. His forehead was marked by two symmetrical bruises. He threw Everson a disclaiming glance and pointed with his thumb behind him. The commander saw Pentsteven, who with a slight twinkle in his eye was emerging from under a pile of maps.

Finally, Carmene was still sitting at his place. His legs were crossed and he was tapping excitedly with the upper one. His eyebrows were lifted high.

"Would somebody get this clown off me?" Scoobey called.

Sternal and Landi fell on Bellinger and pulled him away from the first officer. Several men were still unconscious.

Everson picked up a microphone and spoke into it. "This is the commander speaking," he said calmly. He hoped that his voice could be heard everywhere in the ship. And he wished that each and every crew member could be able to understand him.

"Shortly before the final landing, the *MEXICO*'s antigrav field went out on us. The reasons for this failure are still unknown. Everyone knows what has to be done in such cases. We must determine at once the extent of the damage. Moreover, I'm calling the crew to a state of increased alarm readiness."

He stopped to motion reassuringly to Dr. Morton, who was just then storming in. The doctor turned his attention to the unconscious and hurt men.

"The impact was not so strong that we need fear any fatalities," Everson continued. "Dr. Morton and Dr. Lewellyn will look over the injured. The serious cases will be brought to Dr. Lewellyn in the med-station while Dr. Morton will go around in the ship. All uninjured technicians are to begin at once with determining the damage suffered by the *MEXICO* during its fall. I'll be awaiting reports of any serious damage."

He watched as Scoobey stood up and slowly came over to him. Bellinger was still unconscious. Pentsteven was sorting through the star maps.

Everson cleared his throat, then continued. "I must remind you that we find ourselves on an alien planet. Our current situation demands utmost caution. No one is to leave the ship without an explicit order to that effect. We are on the edge of an extended desert area. Night will be over in 7 hours. We can begin with our examination of the outer world to the extent that our instruments are still in order. However, keep in mind that we have no means of taking flight. Further announcements will follow. Over and out."

Scoobey, standing next to him, rubbed himself on the chest. "We should concern ourselves first with the air conditioning," he suggested. "We don't have to tax our own air supply system if we can make use of Moluk's air.

"That is *one* problem," said the colonel.

"And the other?" Walt Scoobey wanted to know. Everson's fingers closed around the microphone. "It's less a problem as such and more an important question. *Why* did the antigrav system suddenly give out? There isn't any reason for it. The only explanation I can think of would be outside influence."

"That sounds rather fantastic," Scoobey put in. "Perhaps the technicians will find the cause of the breakdown."

A loudspeaker crackled and interrupted their discussion.

"Technician Ferranion here, sir," an excited voice sounded. Everson raised the microphone to his mouth. "What is it?" he asked.

"Bad news, sir. The lifeboat hangar was almost completely smashed in the crash. Extended repairs are necessary to make it usable again. Two of the boats are undamaged but we don't have any way of launching them."

"Thanks," said Everson.

"Now we're stuck here," Carmene commented drily. "You're certainly perceptive," Scoobey said sarcastically. He turned to Everson and added: "Maybe we can dismantle the two lifeboats and take the pieces out thin the airlock. Outside, we could put them back together."

"How long would that take?" Everson asked. Scoobey shrugged. "About three weeks," he said. "Or longer."

A groan interrupted them. Edward Bellinger was coming to. Dr. Morton lifted him up.

Bellinger held his head. "What happened?" he whispered.

While Pentstevan briefly filled him in, Everson thought over the suggestion of his first officer. "I think we could spare ourselves the labor with the lifeboats," he finally decided. "We'll confine ourselves to the repair work. That can't take up much more time."

The stabilization indicators of the *MEXICO* were no longer working. However, Everson suspected that all the landing legs were broken. Judging from the angle of the floor in the control room, the spacesphere was tilting more than 20° forward.

After four hours Everson had been informed of the scale of the accident.

More than 50 men were injured and could not resume their normal duties. Everson had about 100 crewmen available for use when he needed them.

The technicians figured on four weeks of work before they could make the *MEXICO* ready for takeoff again. Two of the landing legs had split like matches and were completely unusable. One had been torn away and the others were more or less bent.

The worst damage was to the sensitive electronic equipment. Valuable measuring devices had been hopelessly destroyed. Only one of the tracking devices had survived the crash. The matter sensor was totally wrecked. Almost all the oscillographs, vidscreens and fluorescent screens were

broken. The small ship's observatory, located next to the lifeboat hangar, had been completely demolished by a spaceboat that had come loose.

The hangar itself offered a bleak scene. Three boats had been torn out of their anchoring and caused considerable damage wherever they had struck.

The launching bay was now only a deformed hole.

The ultrafast cruiser of the State Class was a wreck. Unable to move, it lay in the desert of an alien planet.

Everson stepped into the opened airlock and sniffed the air testingly. It was now broad daylight. The green sun had not yet reached its zenith but already the heated air shimmered over the desert.

To the right of the *MEXICO* extended a flat hill grown over with thin, leaf-poor plants. Behind the rise in the ground began one of Moluk's narrow vegetation belts.

"Give me the field glasses," said Everson to Weiss, who was standing next to him.

"What do you hope to find?" asked Goldstein, also standing in the airlock.

The telepath carried his left arm in a sling. He had sprained it in the crash.

Everson took the binoculars and raised them to his eyes, adjusting the focus. "We can hardly make anything out from here," he said after awhile.

"That hill is blocking our view of the area that might be inhabited." He shook his head and lowered the field glasses.

"What should we do?" Weiss wanted to know.

"We'll send out an expedition. It'll go over to that small mountain and find out what's on the other side. For the moment, that'll be all."

He motioned to Weiss. "That's be your department, Poul. Go get Dr. Morton. He'll go with you and Goldstein. It'd probably be better if you all put on spacesuits. Have Mr. Scoobey fit you out with weapons."

Weiss disappeared with a satisfied smile. Goldstein remained, waiting expectantly.

"Can you do it even with your sprained arm?" asked the colonel.

"Of course, sir!"

Everson noticed the young mutant's hesitation. Something made him uncertain.

Everson rested his hand on the telepath's shoulder. "Is there anything else you'd like to tell me?"

"Yes," Goldstein burst out, "ever since we've landed, my telepathic

abilities have been weakening.”

“What?” demanded the commander of the *MEXICO*. “Are you trying to tell me that you can’t read the minds of other living creatures anymore?”

“I believe that’s about the case,” Goldstein admitted. “I’m having great difficulties, sir. It’s not only that my paranormal power of perception has suffered but I’m also sensing a mental pressure from outside.”

Everson looked at him with an increasing sense of disquiet. “Explain that,” he told Goldstein.

“Your thoughts, sir, are coming through to me only in a very blurred manner.” He blushed. “Excuse me, sir. Please don’t think I was trying to spy on your thoughts. It was only an unconscious test.”

“Very well,” said Everson. “Please continue.” Goldstein wiped his face. Small beads of sweat had formed on his forehead. He seemed to be extremely wrought up.

“It’s hard to explain, sir. Imagine trying to read some writing in a dim light. It would take you a long time before you’d done it.”

“I understand,” said the colonel. “Do these symptoms remind you in any way of Mataal and his special abilities?”

“Not at all, sir,” answered the mutant.

Everson looked thoughtfully out into the desert. A gentle wind stirred the half-dried out plant growth in the dunes.

“Do you will want to go with Weiss to the hill?” Everson asked.

“Naturally,” said Goldstein determinedly.

* * * *

Three figures made their way through the sand. They left deep tracks behind them.

Poul Weiss stopped. He looked back at the *MEXICO*. They had left the questionable safety of the spacer. Weiss knew that the ship’s gunposts and torpedo tubes on the side facing them were in full readiness. Behind every raybeamer, behind every neutrino cannon, there was now a weapons specialist waiting to answer any attack on the three men in a fitting manner. Nevertheless, Weiss did not feel especially comfortable.

“What’s wrong?” asked Dr. Morton impatiently. His unruly red beard was visible even through the helmet viewing plate. His blue eyes flashed quarrelsomely at Weiss.

"I just turned around once, that's all," Weiss told him. The doctor grumbled unpleasantly and went on. Goldstein had taken hold of his wounded arm.

When they reached the first of the plants, Weiss stopped once again. He rubbed one of the leaves between thumb and forefinger. It crumbled away. Weiss opened his helmet and blew the remnants from his hand. "Dried out," he said tersely.

"It would be better if you were to close your helmet," Dr. Morton said.

Weiss broke off a branch and put it in his carrying bag. "I'd like to know where these thin things store their moisture," he murmured. "The stem is hollow."

"Come on," Morton pressed him. "We want to go on."

They climbed onwards up the gentle rise. They remained in constant communication over their helmet telecoms. In the same way they could make contact with the *MEXICO*.

The higher they went, the thicker became the plant growth. Small bushes and shrubs appeared.

Finally they were high enough that they could see the other side. The area was thickly overgrown in spots. Lizardlike creatures scuttled across the sand that was here more darkly colored.

"Look, Poul!" Goldstein called excitedly. "Over there!" Dr. Morton put his hand over his viewplate to shield his eyes from the bright sunlight shining down. "What's that?" he asked with excessive loudness.

"A city," said Weiss simply.

3.

THE MYSTERIOUS TOWER

It was in fact a city, although by Terran standards the word village might have been more appropriate. It lay, surrounded by strange-appearing woods, in the deepest part of the valley that stretched out before the three spacemen. The buildings were basketlike configurations, none of them more than four meters high. They had been built quite close to one another and painted over with some stark white substance. Narrow, tall openings, evidently doors, and round windows could be made out. At first the Terrans would not have estimated the number of buildings as being very high but a closer look showed that the buildings had been built in such tangled confusion that there might be more than a thousand of them.

Dr. Morton was the first to speak. "Looks rather primitive. The buildings remind me of beehives. If the beings that live in them are as productive but less capable of defense than our Terran bees, then we can be thoroughly satisfied."

"Goldstein," said Weiss, turning to the telepath, "what do you sense?"

"Nothing," answered Goldstein with a cracking voice.

"Nothing? What do you mean by that?"

"I can't pick up any mental radiations," said Goldstein, near desperation. "My abilities have now been completely extinguished."

"That can't be," the doctor broke in. "You can't all of a sudden find yourself having only a normal brain."

"But that's the way it is."

Weiss looked at the city. Was something there that could affect Goldstein's paranormal properties? Could they have already detected a sign of the mysterious molecular deformers?

No, Weiss thought, a technically advanced race would not live in such buildings. There must be another explanation for Goldstein's blackout.

"It looks as though the city is uninhabited," Dr. Morton said, interrupting his thoughts. "I can't see any sign of life."

"Let's go take a look," Weiss suggested.

"Stop!" called a sharp voice in their helmet loud-speakers.

It was Everson. Involuntarily they glanced back at the *MEXICO*, although

of course they could not see their commander from there.

“Don’t do anything stupid, Poul,” Everson warned. “You don’t know what might be waiting for you there. We’ll have to observe the settlement very carefully first.”

Irritated, Weiss zipped up his carrying bag. “It looks completely safe, sir,” he remarked. “We’re armed and we’re in contact with the ship.”

At that moment, Dr. Morton spoke. “It won’t be necessary for us to go looking for the natives—they’re already coming to us!”

He nodded deliberately in the direction of the woods. Weiss stumbled as he quickly turned around. His eyes widened. He felt his heart beginning to beat faster. He heard Goldstein’s loud breathing-sounding as though the young mutant was lacking for air.

A group of strange creatures had stepped out from between the trees and were slowly approaching the three space travelers. They walked upright and that alone was enough to justify the suspicion that they were intelligent.

Even before mankind had conquered space, important scientists had been convinced that only uprightwalking beings could develop a civilization in the *human* sense. The theory had by and large been borne out.

The natives were somewhat taller than a man. They had two legs and two arms. Weiss noticed that they had long, gourd-shaped heads. Their trunks were unusually short but they also had long, powerful legs. As they came nearer, the men saw that the skin of the beings was almost a dark green and that their mouths resembled duckbills.

Weiss was the one who put into words what the others were thinking. “They look like storks!”

“I can’t sense them,” said Goldstein slowly. “But they must surely radiate mental impulses.”

“They’re dragging something along with them,” murmured Dr. Morton, his eyes narrowed. “Can you make out what it is, Poul?”

“Sticks of some kind,” said the biologist. “Wooden staffs with a thickening at the upper end.”

Morton clutched his companion by the arm. “Those things remind me of something,” he said tensely.

The approximately 30 natives stopped 50 meters away. Before the doctor had a chance to say what the staffs reminded him of, the natives began with an incomprehensible labor. They rammed the tips of the staffs into the sand

so that the thicker portions were about one meter above the ground. The men watched them in silence.

“They’re igniting them,” Weiss cried out in excitement. “Look, Doc – they have fire.”

30 explosions shattered the air.

“Throw yourselves down!” Dr. Morton shouted. “Get your face down!”

“What is it?” Weiss gasped, his face pressed into the sand.

Something touched him at the feet and slipped onwards. He looked up carefully. The natives were storming towards them with improbable speed. Dr. Morton had drawn his paralysers and opened fire. Goldstein and Weiss followed his example. The bird-creatures collapsed: their nervous systems had failed them.

Goldstein pulled a spear-like object from the ground. He held it out to Weiss. “A kind of arrow,” mused the biologist. “Seems to be made of metal. The point looks like bronze.”

“Now I know what the staffs reminded me of,” said Dr. Morton, putting away his gun. “Firework rockets!”

“You’re right,” said Weiss. “They’re primitive rockets. The payload goes in the top, which in this case is the metal arrow. All they need is an explosive substance and a fuse.”

Around them lay other, similar arrows. One had exploded at the launching site with the result that its owner had sunk injured to the ground.

Their helmet loudspeakers crackled and Everson’s voice became audible. “Try to bring two of these creatures on board, Poul. Come back now. The others won’t be very friendly when they come to. I wouldn’t like to use raybeamers against these primitives.”

Weiss smiled painfully. It looked very much as though Rhodan’s hopes for encountering strong allies had been in vain. The weapons of these bird-creatures would in any case be of no help. The Chinese had used similar rockets in the year 1232 in the defense of Kaifung-Fu. And the Mongols, on whom they had fired the rockets, had been an incomparably more harmless enemy than a fleet of Springers or Druufs.

The native lay flat on the bed, breathing in short, forceful gasps. Although his eyes were closed, there could be no question that he had recovered consciousness. His four-fingered hands were pressed tightly against his body.

The small expedition had brought on board the *MEXICO* two Greens – as

Morton had dubbed the natives. Everson had let one go in order to demonstrate his good intentions to the natives.

The other now lay here in Dr. Lewellyn's med-station and feigned unconsciousness. Everson could imagine very well the fear the being must be feeling.

Dr. Lewellyn bent over the Green. The doctor was an average-sized man with the face of a film star. In contrast to Dr. Morton, he placed a high value on taking good care of his outer appearance.

He tapped gently against the alien's arm. Weiss, standing in the background, cleared his throat impatiently. Dr. Morton sat at the foot of the bed and tugged at his beard.

"I'm telling you that your methods won't get any results," he said to Dr. Lewellyn. "You'll never make him tractable this way."

Everson motioned him to silence. Dr. Lewellyn began to speak to the Green in a reassuring, soothing voice. Now and then it touched him softly.

Finally the Green opened his eyes. They were brown, earnest eyes whose lids lacked any lashes, giving them a reptilian stare. The head and body of the prisoner were completely hairless.

The Green stared at Dr. Lewellyn. Fear and incomprehension could be seen in its eyes. Slowly, so as not to frighten the creature, the doctor pointed his finger to his own chest. "Doctor," he said quietly.

Morton let go with a contemptuous snort. It was not clear whether it was directed at Dr. Lewellyn personally or at his method of making contact.

"Go on," Everson ordered. "We've got to find a way to communicate with it somehow."

Patiently, Dr. Lewellyn gestured to himself once more, repeating the word "doctor."

The Green's paralysis relaxed somewhat. The fourmembered hand moved carefully and testingly into the air. Then it moved its beak-like mouth. "Mrght," it croaked.

Morton shoved his index fingers into his ears. "I don't like a lot of consonants," he said. "They make me sick."

"Very good," said Dr. Lewellyn. "We've made a start."

"Dgtr," said Murgut hopefully. "Drftgz hgbsg!"

"He says he wants something to drink," Weiss offered. He laughed but his laughter died when he looked at Goldstein.

The mutant had pressed both his hands to his temples. "I can't reach him," the telepath moaned. "He's intelligent but I can't get through to him."

before anyone could say anything, Sammy Goldstein had rushed out of the room. The hatch closed behind him. Murgut gave a start.

"What was the meaning of that?" Everson asked slowly.

"I'll take care of him," Dr. Morton promised and stood up.

Depressed, Everson remembered the events in the guppy as Goldstein had been put through the wringer while under the influence of the molecular transformite Mataal. Was a similar situation about to develop? It was still too early to make any decisions. In any event, further investigations must be undertaken with great caution. Rhodan, who urgently needed every ship, had sent them to Moluk only to find eventual help there. The commander had to keep this goal in mind all the time. No hour should be allowed to tick by unused.

"Continue with it, Doc," he told Lewellyn. Please let me know once you've gotten far enough along with him that we can bring him to the translator."

The natives were certainly civilized but the state of their development was not especially advanced. But that alone seemed paradoxical, for two things had happened that, considered in connection with the Greens, seemed impossible: the antigrav field had gone out and Goldstein had lost his paranormal abilities after meeting a native.

Everson was an experienced man who did not act on the basis of mere suppositions. No one knew better than he how often in the history of human space travel 'proven facts' had been shown to be false.

If there were a connection between the Greens, the antigrav field and the mutant, then it should be only a matter of finding it. Or was there something else on this planet that they had not yet discovered?

It occurred to him that Goldstein had picked up impulses while the *MEXICO* was still in space. Then, after the crash that followed, the mutant's ability had decreased, finally failing altogether by the meeting with the Greens.

The commander pressed his lips together. That meant nothing else than that Goldstein's ability had weakened in proportion to his approach to the natives.

Was that strictly coincidental or were the Greens able to parapsychologically block Goldstein? Whatever the explanation, this clue had to be followed up.

Everson left the med-station with a thoughtful expression on his face. The situation of the *MEXICO* and its crew did not seem dangerous for the moment. There were only a few unanswered questions.

Their answering, the colonel thought, could very well quickly point out a danger that they as yet did not even suspect.

After four days of standard time, Everson, Weiss, Scoobey, Goldstein, Lewellyn and Morton had, with the help of the translator and the ship's positronicon, advanced far enough with the Greens' language that they could communicate with Murgut. Other crew members were busy practicing the tongue-twisting manner of speech peculiar to Murgut's race.

"We would have never attacked if we hadn't thought you had come out of the desert to destroy our village," Murgut said, apologizing for the shooting of the rockets.

The fear the Greens had for the desert and especially for everything connected with it was so conspicuous that it was expressed in almost every sentence. Murgut's attitude could probably be extended to the rest of his race. The natives were ruled by a superstitious fear.

After Dr. Lewellyn had been able to convince the Green that the *MEXICO* had fallen from the sky, Murgut's mistrust receded noticeably. He became more voluble.

"Careful, my friend," said Dr. Lewellyn, rubbing his smooth-shaven chin. "What frightens you and your people so much about the desert? Do you fear the terrible storms or do you believe that demons and evil gods live there?"

He emphasized his questions with the help of finger signs and gestures.

The bird-creature nodded. "The wasteland is evil embodied, Doctor," said Murgut fearfully. "Many Greens have disappeared there or they have returned insane. Strange things happen that are uncanny to us."

"Some of these duckbills have probably gotten sun-stroke," Dr. Morton put in. "Considering how hot it gets out there during the day, it's no wonder."

"Nor is it surprising if often one of them gets stuck out in the desert in a sandstorm," said Weiss. "To the primitive imagination, the desert itself is responsible: that's why they call it 'evil embodied'."

"What do you think, Doc?" asked Everson.

"I think we're making it too simple," said Dr. Lewellyn. "Let's not forget that the Greens have grown up under the local conditions. Generation upon generation have lived here. The endless sand must be a part of their

environment – and thus normal. I would think that this race knows full well the danger of a dust hurricane and also how easily a person could disappear in one.

He considered for a moment. The discussion was carried on in English and Murgut followed it with eyes blinking in incomprehension.

“According to my theory,” Dr. Lewellyn went on, “the fear of the natives would be induced only by later experiences. In no case could they be inherent or inborn. Uncanny things have taken place in the desert that did not happen earlier – that’s why the Greens are terrified.”

Everson cautiously wet his lips. You have a very definite idea of what happened in the desert, right, Doc?” he asked.

“One hypothesis is as good as the other,” the doctor said, avoiding a direct answer.

“Don’t try to spare me!” Sammy Goldstein cried out shrilly. He made a few steps towards Dr. Lewellyn. “You think the shape changers are out there,” he shouted at the doctor. “And you’re afraid that they already have me under their control again!”

* * * *

The storm blew waves of sand before it. Bushes torn out by their roots sailed through the air. The heavens had taken on a dark grey color. Four shadowy figures moved through the hurricane: three men in spacesuits and a Green. The men ran, bent over forward against the wind, while the dust whirled around them.

Everson cursed the bad luck that had allowed them to run right into a sandstorm. Together with Weiss, Dr. Morton and Murgut he had been on his way to the Green village. Then the storm had broken without any warning. Everson could not shake himself of the feeling that the native had known of it. Murgut was only a dark shadow ahead of him but he moved almost unhindered, as though the storm were no problem for him.

“I have the feeling we’re going off in the wrong direction,” sounded the voice of the biologist in Everson’s helmet loudspeaker.

“We’ll have to depend on Murgut’s orientation sense, the colonel answered. He had raised his voice involuntarily to make himself heard above the whistling wind. That was of course an unconscious reaction, since the helmet screened out the noise of nature gone wild almost completely.

Weiss was not to be put at ease so easily. "I'd rather depend on my feeling," he grumbled. "It tells me we're going the wrong way."

Everson felt himself infected by the biologist's disquiet. Did the Green intend to lure them a trap and disappear? he wondered.

Then the colonel remembered that they were in contact with the *MEXICO* and could at any time call for help. Even so, it would not be out of place if he asked Murgut about it.

The Green was just in front of him. His long legs striding as though they were stilts, he passed through the dunes with absolute certainty. Everson was hard-pressed to keep up the pace. The wind was coming from one side at full force and threatened to blow him over. Morton's sturdy figure appeared next to him.

Everson pointed silently at the Green. The doctor motioned to show that he had understood. Blue and yellow flashes sparkled continuously in the gloom ahead and Everson suspected that they were electrical discharges. He stumbled and fell and had to use both hands to regain his feet. The ground beneath him felt yielding and capable of moving, as though it were a living mass.

Then Everson was next to the bird-creature. He took hold of Murgut's arm. The Green stopped. He said something but the commander of the *MEXICO* could only see the movements of the beaklike mouth. Everson was not yet so familiar with the language that he could read it by watching the motion of the native's mouth.

He had to open his helmet.

By now Weiss and the doctor had reached them. The biologist stood, bent slightly forward. It looked as though the raging of the elements had compressed him. The stocky Morton seemed like a rock that had been set down in the ghostly landscape.

Everson opened his helmet's faceplate. Fortunately, he stood with his back to the wind so the storm did not force its way into the interior of his helmet. But the noise alone was enough to take his breath away for a few seconds. Air, sand, dust, branches, leaves and other objects were torn away at a fantastic velocity. A thousand devils seemed to be fanning the atmosphere with their hot breath, driving it into furious tossing and turning. An apocalyptic orchestra had come on stage to play a hellish concert ranging from shrieking crescendo to muted thunder.

Everson pulled Murgut close to him. "Where is the village?" he shouted. His voice was torn away and lost in the raging storm.

The Green brought his ugly, basket-shaped head close to Everson's face. For a brief moment the spaceman thought he saw the brown eyes sparkle.

"Where is the village?" Everson repeated.

This time Murgut had understood. His four-fingered hand pointed in the direction along which they had already been moving.

"Are you sure?" Everson shouted, his face red in the exertion.

The Green nodded. Everson let go of him and they worked their way onwards.

"Sir," came a voice in Everson's helmet loudspeaker. "Goldstein here aboard the *MEXICO*."

"Everything's alright here," said the colonel. "We're on our way to the village. Murgut knows his way from here."

"I have some news for you," said the mutant. His voice was so low that Everson could understand him only with difficulty. "Dr. Lewellyn thinks that I should tell you."

"Then speak," Everson ordered.

"Once Murgut left the ship, I was able to pick up weak impulses again," the telepath stated.

Everson's boots kicked up the sand. *But of course*, he thought. "It's the natives, Sammy," he said. "Evidently they give off some sort of mental radiation that has a negative effect on parapsychological abilities. They don't seem aware of their gift, though. The more there are of them and the closer they are to you, the weaker your paranormal power becomes."

Goldstein's answer betrayed considerable excitement. "Dr. Lewellyn is of the same opinion. He wants to work out with the help of the two psycho-technicians a defense screen that will protect me from mental pressure."

"Good," Everson agreed. "Tell them to hurry."

A thought shot through Everson's mind. He came to an involuntary stop. The storm took advantage of the opportunity for a frontal assault. The gust virtually blew Everson off his feet. He fell against Weiss, who was knocked to the ground by the impact. Then Morton came up and helped them to their feet. Murgut stopped and waited.

When they could proceed, the thought in Everson's mind had solidified almost into certainty.

If Goldstein's parapsychological power suffered from the disturbing radiation emanating from the Greens, then the molecular transformites must be similarly affected. What could have been more natural than for

them to withdraw into the desert to retain their powers after having encountered the unforeseen danger?

If there were shape changers on Moluk, then they were to be found in the planet's endless reaches of sand.

But the deserts were *evil embodied!*

Everson shuddered at the thought.

Even so, he thought. There was on Earth a proud and lonely man – Perry Rhodan – who risked every struggle for mankind. Now he was counting on support; now he urgently needed any help he could find.

If, in the heat-bathed expanses of Moluk, allies for mankind were to be found, then he would find them. So Everson swore.

Someone shook him. It was Murgut. The bird-creature pointed ahead.

It was the village!

Although he could make out only the outlines of the buildings, the commander felt relieved. Now, as they went down the hill, the hurricane had lost some of its force. With a swift motion of his hand, Everson reassured himself that his paralysers were still in place. He did not care for the idea of being unexpectedly pierced by an arrow. Though Murgut had assured him there was no danger of that, the colonel was still skeptical. The purpose of the expedition was to ask other Greens about the desert and the strange events of which Murgut had spoken earlier.

They reached the first building and Everson regretted that in the twilight he could not see all the details. Doors and windows were sealed up with plates to keep out the sand. Narrow streets, through which bushes and trash were blown, snaked between the houses. All life seemed to be extinct. The space travelers could imagine that the Greens had retired to wait out the storm in safety. The globular structures gave a massive impression, although they resembled caves more than advanced forms of shelter.

Murgut led them along the street until he finally stopped in front of one of the 'igloos'. Everson wondered silently how the Green could tell the houses apart – to *him* they all looked alike. Through slits in the doors and windows came flickering light of varying intensity that showed the natives neither made use of nor were familiar with electricity.

Murgut motioned for the three men to wait, then slipped suddenly into the house. Everson risked opening his helmet but he heard only the wind singing its complaining song between the igloos. The air was hot and dry. Everson felt sand grating between his teeth.

When he had closed the viewpate of his helmet once more, Murgut came back. He waited for the Terrans to follow him into the house.

“Poul,” Everson said, “wait outside until I come get you. If I’m not back in three minutes, something will be wrong.”

He nodded to Morton and they followed the birdcreature. Weiss remained behind, a lost phantom in the midst of an alien world that had greeted its visitors with hostility and threatening mysteries.

Everson and the doctor came into a room in which was so gloomy they could hardly see more than two meters ahead. Open lights, filled with a burning substance, hung in a row around the walls, throwing surreal reflections on the ground. Everson realized that he had no choice but to open his helmet again.

A penetrating stench hit his nostrils full force. He coughed and forced himself to breathe more slowly. Now he saw that the room was filled with Greens. They crouched at the walls, their frozen faces staring at the men. The commander felt as though he were present at a séance.

“I’d be ready to trade places with Lewellyn,” Dr. Morton commented acidly. “The cause of this terrible smell would probably present a serious problem to his sensitivity for cleanliness.” Then he was forced to cough.

“My friends bid you welcome,” Murgut said. “They regret the rocket attack and are ready to make up for it. The individuals assembled here make up the Reproduction Council of the city.”

Everson decided it would be best to remember that he was a guest before he turned his thoughts in earnest to the term ‘Reproduction Council’. In any event, they were facing the ruling class of the Greens.

“Call Poul in here,” he told the doctor.

Judging from the speed with which Dr. Morton proceeded to follow his order, the doctor must have been happy to be able to escape the stench for a few moments. When he came back with Weiss, there was a mischievous grin on his face that increased when the biologist opened his helmet.

Weiss sniffed cautiously. Then, when Morton’s smile faded, his face took on a radiant expression.

“Aaah,” he sighed. “What a lovely aroma!”

“Do you really think so?” demanded the doctor.

Weiss raised his arms defensively, as though his sense of smell was somehow threatened by Dr. Morton’s rumbling voice. He extended his head far forward and sucked in the stifling air as though it were an elixir.

Everson brought Weiss' theatre to an end by turning to the assembled Greens. "We come from the..."

He faltered, for the Green word for stars was unknown to him, assuming there was one at all. Murgut came to his aid with a long-winded explanation.

"Our homeland is far away: so far away that you are hardly able to imagine such a distance. We have a mission and we are hoping for your help to accomplish it: we would like to put together an expedition to go out into the desert."

An uncanny stillness descended on the room with his last words. Every movement of the Greens died.

"*Evil embodied*," said Murgut after awhile. "You will never find anyone to accompany you."

Another Green had stood up and come before Everson. He was older than Murgut, and the colonel judged from the respectful whispering that accompanied his action that this must be a leader. The old Green looked questioningly at Everson.

"There was once a time in which you could have found support," croaked the descendent of a race of birds, "But that was a long time ago. The land of sand is dangerous and brings death. Unholy things happen there. Anyone who goes very far from the village on the hunt will die." He stamped his horny foot to emphasize his word.

"We have powerful weapons," said Everson. "There is no force that we can't turn back. You need have no fear. We promise that all who come with us will return to the village."

"Evil embodied is not to be defeated," stated the Green categorically.

A murmur of agreement arose from the assembled Greens. Everson felt a growing sense of bitterness. Without the lifeboats he was forced to go out into the desert on foot. For that he would urgently need the help of a native guide. He had seen for himself during the sandstorm that only Murgut had known which way to go. Besides, it was questionable whether the location devices would still function properly during a storm.

He tried again. "We will make you gifts. We will bring you eternal light, and deadly thunder and lightning for the hunt."

"Corpses can hunt no more," the old Green answered, his logic irrefutable, and withdrew. His answer had been final.

"It's useless," Weiss said. "We'll never be able to convince them, sir. At

least, not without force.”

“I have no intention whatsoever of using force here,” the colonel assured him.

“I know a Green who would perhaps go with you,” said Murgut. He hesitated and looked uncertainly back at his fellows. “Will I get one of your presents if I bring him to you?”

“Good,” said Everson. “You will be rewarded if you help us.”

“*Evil embodied* will destroy you, Murgut, for this temptation,” a warning voice came from out of the fumes.

“We’d better hurry,” urged Dr. Morton. “Otherwise these babblers will talk our friend out of it again.”

Murgut led them back out onto the street. The storm had subsided.

The prospect of receiving a gift seemed to spur the Green on, for his long legs took such wide steps that the space travelers could keep step with him only with difficulty. The sun, previously all but completely blocked by clouds of dust, now shone down with unmoderated effect on the land. Everson saw with a glance at his exterior thermometer that the temperature had already climbed to over 40°.

At the edge of the village most distant from the *MEXICO*, the men discovered for the first time long structures that in contrast to the houses and residential buildings looked modern.

“Those are our factories and breeding halls,” Murgut said, replying readily to the commander’s question.

Hissing, droning and stamping could be heard. Blue steam swelled from openings in the roofs.

“We’re experimenting with heated air,” explained Murgut proudly. “In compressed form it can be used for many purposes.”

“They’re in the process of inventing the steam engine,” said Weiss, astonished. “Judging from the noises, their first models are by no means inferior to those of James Watt.”

An explosion rendered them silent.

“Often,” said Murgut resignedly, “there are setbacks.”

Everson pictured to himself a group of disappointed Greens now standing around the demolished result of long work. Nevertheless, they would try again, just as the human race had always tried again. The development of a race was dependent on the difficulties it had to struggle against, whether in the invention of a steam engine or in developing highly advanced space

travel.

Behind the factories stretched a sort of plantation. Several Greens were at work in the fields. Off to one side of the farming area stood a single, partially caved-in igloo. It did not shine with the radiant white of the other buildings.

"There it is," said Murgut. "There lives Npln."

"Napoleon!" Dr. Morton interrupted. "His name lives on even on the edge of the galactic center."

Somewhere in the past there had been an ancestor of Dr. Morton's in whose veins flowed the blood of French kings. The doctor's passion for referring to that at every available opportunity stopped at nothing. He looked at the tumbledown hut with an inner rapture, as though it were the palace of Louis XIV.

They ran along a narrow path past the fields. The Greens dropped their work and stared over at them. Murgut waved reassuringly.

When they reached the home of 'Napoleon', Murgut had them wait outside. "Npln is a quarrelsome and cantankerous old fellow," he said apologetically. "He sleeps most of the time. When someone disturbs him, he becomes hostile. I'll prepare him for your visit."

"Do you think that the old coot that allegedly lives here can help us, sir?" Weiss asked Everson irritably. "With all due respect to his high-sounding name" – a brief, ironic side glance went to Dr. Morton – "I'm instead of the opinion we'll hardly find any help here."

Before the colonel could answer, Murgut was back. "He's in a bad mood," he said, depressed. "I had to promise him many gifts for him to receive you."

Everson thought in amusement that Murgut could have survived and even prospered in an Arabian street-market.

They entered the hut through a door whose frame was broken. A brief time went by before their eyes adjusted to the half-light in the interior. Everson noted thankfully that the stench was less here than in the other building.

Npln crouched in a corner of the room.

It is not easy for a member of an alien race, to estimate a native's age but the Green sitting on the ground in front of him *was* old. His green skin was wrinkled and shriveled. He was so thin that he reminded one of a wire figure wrapped in paper. His face was withered and sunken; his eyes, dark as coal, sparkled from deep caverns.

Encountering beings of a sort he had never before seen nor heard of did not seem to impress him at all. “They’re ugly,” he said grumbly to Murgut. “Fat and ugly creatures. Especially that one there.”

A thin arm pointed out Dr. Morton, who at that moment would have gladly exchanged his French royal blood with that of an Irish freedom fighter.

“We are deeply sorry that our external appearance causes you displeasure, Napoleon,” Everson said, “but bountiful gifts will compensate you for the strain of having to look at us.”

Napoleon gurgled – but whether satisfied or dissatisfied, who could say?

Everson drew upon the oldest of all psychological tricks, one that was even now the most effective: he played up to the Green’s vanity. “We have come to the bravest man in the village to beseech his help,” he said. “Your experience is highly regarded everywhere.”

“They all hate me,” croaked Napoleon bitterly. “I’m an inconvenience to them, a foolish old man who isn’t good for anything any more!”

“We’re looking for a guide for an expedition into the desert,” said Everson frankly. “No one has the courage, to accompany us. How about you, my friend?”

The old native let out a shrill whistle. He looked at them craftily. “*Evil embodied!*” he whispered cunningly. “Only I dare go out. I know that land. Strange things happen there. Deep in the interior there’s a tower in which demons and devils live.”

“A tower?” exclaimed Weiss excitedly. “What does it look like?”

Napoleon traced the shape of a building with his hand. “Large and mighty: the strongest hurricane doesn’t affect it at all,” he said.

“Can you take us there?” Everson asked slowly.

“You’ll have to carry me,” said Napoleon. “I’m too weak to go long distances by myself. Then I’ll guide you to every place in this hell.”

Everson felt someone tugging at the arm of his spacesuit. He turned to look in Murgut’s fear-filled face.

“Can I have the presents *before* this undertaking begins?” the Green inquired worriedly.

It was not hard to understand that question. Murgut was convinced that Napoleon would lead the men into the desert.

But not out again!

4.

EVIL EMBODIED

On all planets, endless deserts and vast seas have a dangerous similarity: any given place looks like another. There are no reference points at ground-level by which one can orient oneself.

Even during the earlier period of their development, men had solved the problem in an obvious manner: caravans and sailing ships reckoned their position by day according to the position of the sun and by night the constellations served as reference points.

Napoleon had never heard anything of such methods but he seemed to have some special conception of how to cross unknown regions.

Bellinger had maintained that the Green could smell the direction but a closer observation of Napoleon's atrophied olfactory organs showed that this idea did not come especially near the truth.

Col. Marcus Everson had selected 30 men, and just three hours before the party had started out under his command. Walt Scoobey was in authority on board the *MEXICO* for the duration of Everson's absence. Taking into consideration all safety measures, the First Officer was to continue with the repair work as quickly as possible and have it completed by Everson's return. The expedition carried ample radio equipment along so that contact could be made with the spaceship at any time. All the spacemen were heavily armed and wore spacesuits.

Two robots carried Napoleon on a litter especially prepared for this purpose. The peculiar troika formed the point of the group. The colonel had seen to it that a large supply of food concentrates, water capsules and vitamin tablets were carried along. Dr. Morton was a walking med-station.

The weather was exceptionally calm by local standards. It was still early in the morning and the temperatures were still bearable.

According to Napoleon's claims, they would require three Moluk days and nights to reach the mysterious tower. Different opinions had been aired concerning the matter. Before the party started out, Scoobey had remarked that the structure probably existed only in the old Green's fantasies.

Everson had listened to all objections but he would not be swayed from carrying out his plans.

They were now going along the ridge of a long dune which looked no

different from the countless others that had preceded it. Everson walked with Weiss, Bellinger and Goldstein behind the robots and Napoleon. In the rear were Sternal, Landi and Dr. Morton.

Goldstein came up to Everson's side. "Sir! The farther away we get from the *MEXICO*, the better I can perceive mental impulses."

"Remember, too, that we're getting farther away from the native village at the same time. The Greens' mental force is weakening with distance."

"Strange," murmured the human thoughtfully. "Remember what Murgut did to me in this connection? Napoleon has no effect whatsoever on my powers."

"Hmm," the colonel cleared his throat. "Perhaps he is too old and no longer has the same strength as the other Greens."

A cry in their helmet loudspeakers broke off the conversation. They stopped. Pentstevan the astronomer came running towards them. Small cloudlets of dust whirled at his steps. The young man's face was pale and not even the viewing plate could hide the paleness.

"Our greenhorn," murmured Weiss contemptuously. "No doubt he's got sand in his shoes and doesn't know how to get it out."

Pentstevan stopped before Everson. He was gasping for breath and his words came in bursts. "The tracking beam receiver is gone!"

The device served to pick up the guiding beam emitted from the *MEXICO*. The impulses were registered and offered a good means of orientation. The astronomer's task had been to carry the apparatus.

"What?" Everson exclaimed. "What are you saying?"

"It disappeared!" Pentstevan babbled.

"You mean you lost it!" said Everson sharply. "Think about it carefully, young man. Your negligence doesn't please me."

With an unhappy expression the astronomer turned to Weiss but the biologist offered him no support.

"Sir, I'm sure it was still there a few minutes ago. I was constantly checking the items hanging from my belt. Then I felt the weight of the device vanish. When I looked to see, it was gone."

"Are you trying to make us believe in miracles?" asked the commander. "Nonsense is bad enough but when someone tries to excuse himself with lies, he is not worthy of the standard a spacefaring citizen of the Solar Imperium should live up to."

"What happened?" Napoleon broke in. He had been given a loudspeaker

and a microphone to hang around his neck so that the space travelers would not be continually required to open their helmets when they wanted to speak with the Green.

Everson gave him a brief explanation.

“The desert demons have stolen the device,” the old one maintained. “The man is innocent.”

Everson was not inclined to lend any credence to Napoleon’s foolish talk. “Go back to your place,” he told Pentsteven. “I had a good mind to send you back to the ship altogether.”

“Yes sir,” murmured Pentsteven almost inaudibly.

“Let’s go on,” ordered the colonel. He believed neither Pentsteven nor the native – at least not until the matter of Edward Bellinger took place.

* * * *

Edward Bellinger stood 1.97 meters tall and weighed 220 pounds. He moved his body with the grace of a mole whom unfortunate fate had led out onto a mirror-smooth sheet of ice. In the Phys-Ed classes at the Space Academy, Bellinger had played a leading role in boxing and weight-lifting but had always come out the bottom man in judo.

A character study of Bellinger’s face was doomed to failure in advance because he could tighten at will his fatty cushioning, or wrinkle it, let it hang and pull it in. Bellinger had developed his unusual talent to a genuine skill which had many imitators but never a serious rival. By the age of 36, the lieutenant was able to move his ears at a 30° angle.

Within Bellinger’s circle of acquaintances there were rumors that he was not training to form abstract figures with his artfully styled curly hair by the music of an Indian snake charmer’s flute. The only question was where he could get such an instrument on Moluk.

Had the lieutenant learned of these suspicions, he would not have been marching through the sand so forth-rightly next to his commander, the telepath, and Weiss.

The sun, standing high in the sky, reflected in the smooth, polished backs of the two robots, and only their filters prevented the men from being bothered by the light reflections. For Bellinger it was the same as an insult for a space traveler to go walking through the desert on foot. Why, he wondered, was there no Quad aboard the *MEXICO*?

Suddenly, as the blood seemed to freeze in his veins, Lt. Edward Bellinger

watched as his companions all became considerably larger. His breath faltered and choking fear gripped at his throat.

The process continued. The robots, the Green, Everson, Weiss and all the others began to grow and expand.

Bellinger wanted to cry out but his choked throat would not permit him. He thought he was going crazy. His brain was a hammering mass of unclear thoughts that refused to accept the terrible thing that was happening to him.

It became unconsciously clear to him that the noise he was hearing came from the shouts of the spacemen surrounding him. For the lieutenant they had become thundering giants, behemoths and colossi. Even the grains of sand were getting larger.

Icy, paralyzing terror grew up in Bellinger. He heard himself sobbing like a child. He waited to fall over the brink into the abyss of madness at any moment; he even hoped that he would, for he saw in it his sole hope of salvation.

But he did not go mad. Instead, he realized what had actually happened.

The others had not grown.

Only he had changed.

He had shrunk to the size of a midget!

He did not ask himself *how* such a thing could happen. His tortured brain knew only one question: how could he quickly regain his normal size? If only he could understand the others! But their words sounded like the rumbling of a thunderstorm. Their faces were gigantic grimaces far above him.

He was now so small that he had fear of being trampled.

In the sand in front of him, he spotted a small hole. A cave! He ran toward it, between the legs of the men. He forced himself into the narrow opening. It grew dark and he had to switch on his lamp, which like everything else had also become smaller.

The shine of the light showed him very quickly that his flight had taken him straight into the arms of a new danger.

The burrow was inhabited!

A brown-furred monster attacked him.

Flashing canine teeth appeared in the glare of the light, then raced toward Bellinger. An angry growl could be heard even through the helmet. The lieutenant forgot his weapons. Desperately, he threw himself to the side. The bite of the burrow-dweller snapped on empty air. Even so, the impact

of its body was enough to bowl Bellinger over. He fell with his back against a sharp stone that certainly would have seemed very tiny to a normal man. The pain broadened out from his back to his kidney region. But he had no time to think about it.

His enemy set to a renewed attack.

Bellinger rolled away over the ground. A claw raked his arm and ripped the spacesuit. The spotlight fell to the ground. Glass broke. It became dark. Bellinger's breath came in gasps. He quickly opened his helmet so that he could at least hear his adversary. He was able to determine his position more quickly than he would have liked.

The animal was directly behind the lieutenant

Bellinger knew that he had no time for another dodge. The creature sprang and knocked the man down. Bellinger's arms reached out in the darkness and grasped bristly fur. An angry hissing penetrated the open helmet. Bestial breath struck him.

Bellinger's gloved hands had reached that point on his opponent's body where he felt the neck should be. With all the strength left in his over-taxed body, he squeezed. Then he felt himself growing nauseous. Black circles danced in front of his eyes. Something lay on his chest, threatening to choke him.

It's all over, thought Bellinger. Then unconsciousness overtook him and wrapped him in oblivion.

* * * *

Everson was the first to overcome his paralysis. The unbelievability of what had happened had left him almost in a trance. In front of every eye, Lt. Bellinger had shrunk until he was only 15 centimeters high; then he had vanished into the ground.

"Quick!" ordered the colonel. "Start digging up the sand. Careful – we don't want to injure him."

They fell to their knees and scooped the earth away with their gloves. Everson felt something soft under his hands. Gently he brushed the sand away. Then he had exposed it. His stomach turned.

"Oh my stars and little comets!" groaned Weiss, crouching next to him. "A rat!"

They looked at each other, and their faces were filled with an almost insane fear.

Everson threw the dead animal away.

“There, sir!” exclaimed a fear-struck voice.

Sternal helped him to his feet and pointed out in the desert 20 meters away lay a motionless figure.

It was Lt. Edward Bellinger.

In normal size.

“Evil embodied!” shrieked Npln.

5.

WHIRLWIND SINISTER

In the Space Academy of Terrania, training was a rigorous business. And that was a good thing. Here, men – and more rarely, women – were prepared for life in outer space. They were shown with all vividness what was waiting for them out there. Only the toughest, bravest and strongest persons withstood the examinations. An individual had to learn to disengage himself from conventional modes of thinking, for the things that happened between the stars could not always be coped with when regarded in an Earthbound frame of mind. Only a flexible mind that could grapple with new ideas and concepts – negative or positive – could hold up.

The men who were now running through the desert towards Bellinger had only their training to thank that they could still form clear, reasonable decisions.

The lieutenant had opened his eyes and was trying to grin. His suit was torn in a number of places, hanging in shreds and tatters from his chest. The heavy uniform shirt beneath had remained undamaged.

Together with Dr. Morton, Everson raised the wounded man. Bellinger moaned softly. Sternal brought up an extra spacesuit.

“Bruises and scratches,” said Dr. Morton after a brief examination. “Slight nervous shock.”

“Nonsense,” Bellinger puffed indignantly. “I’ll be alright.”

They helped him into the new suit. He refused to be carried on the stretcher next to Napoleon but when he stumbled after a few steps, he reluctantly allowed the robots to pick him up. The old Green did not seem especially enthusiastic about sharing his space and greeted Bellinger with some grudging remarks.

“Well,” said Weiss after the lieutenant had been taken care of, what now?”

Everson instinctively raised his hand to wipe his brow. His fingertips collided with his helmet. For a few moments he felt an urgent desire to pinch his arm to see if it were not all a dream. His mouth was dry and he felt a headache coming on.

“No one is going to say we’ve all been suffering from a hallucination,” he began lowly. “Edward’s condition is clear enough. Each of us was able to see how this man rapidly shrank within a matter of seconds. The shrinking

proceeded in a proportional manner, which is to say that each part of the body was affected in the same way. Even Bellinger's equipment was affected. The stability of a molecular structure is constant but only in a relative sense. A molecular arrangement can be compressed or pulled apart but the system will remain the same. Perhaps it can best be explained by comparing it to photography. You can take a tiny picture of a man and blow it up into an enlargement that shows the figure in the same material substance." He smiled weakly. "I have gigantic size. And yet both photos show the same body, the same material substance." He smiled weakly. "I have no intention of trying to explain this unbelievable event. Every man who witnessed Mataars abilities on the guppy some time ago will agree with me that a molecular transformite isn't hindered in the least by the stability of a molecular structure. These beings are able to alter or reform any arrangement of molecules as they desire. This power would seem to be practically unlimited, except that we can assume with certainty that even a molecular transformite has his limits."

"So you think that such beings are around here somewhere, sir?" asked Landi, the communicator.

"All the signs point to it," Everson answered. "My guess is that Mataars compatriots are trying to make their presence known by way of what happened. Perhaps it was a warning. Who knows? None of us has been killed so far; while that doesn't guarantee that their intentions are peaceful, it does show that they are willing to accept our presence to a certain extent. Let's hope we'll soon find out more about them."

He waved and the column started off once more. Napoleon pointed out the direction in which they were to go. Goldstein had stated that he could not perceive any alien thought-patterns.

In the evening Everson had the group make a halt. Sternal suggested that they swallow Nova Vivo tablets and march on but Everson turned the request down. They had to budget their strength and an artificial stimulation now might have deleterious effects later. Landi made contact with the *MEXICO*. Scoobey reported that the repair work was underway at full speed and was already showing results. More Greens had appeared in the afternoon and settled down near the ship. Dr. Lewellyn said that in his opinion they feared the wrath of the desert demons and were searching for protection by going to the strangers. Murgut, who had been given a flashlight as a gift, had remained inside the ship. Everson decided not to tell Scoobey what had happened to Bellinger. He did not want to disturb the First Officer and thus draw him away from his work.

After they had eaten, Everson had the tents put up. They were made of feather-light plastic and were all but impossible to tear.

Napoleon refused to sleep in a tent. He dug a hole in the sand, grumbling and swearing at the robots. The robots, however, had not been programmed for conversing with Greens and did not reply. Shortly thereafter, Napoleon curled up in his hole and went to sleep.

That night a hurricane blew up of such proportions that any Terran meteorologist faced with it would have either gone mad or at least have decided to request an early retirement.

* * * *

At first it was only a whisper, no louder than the gentle spray of bubbles in a freshly-poured glass of wine. Then it sounded like the pattering of uncountable naked children's feet across a stone floor. Finally it was a rustle, as though someone in the distance were stirring up a half-extinguished fire.

Everson came out of his semi-slumber with a jolt. He reached for his lamp and switched it on. Weiss and Goldstein, who were spending the night with him, were sound asleep. The colonel looked at his watch and saw that the night had begun only two hours before. They had laid their helmets aside because the evening air had been refreshing in spite of its poverty in oxygen. It had reminded Everson of his trips to the mountains during his youth. Now, although the sun had long set, the air was humid and oppressive.

Everson opened the tent window and looked out. A flood of hot air struck him in the face. Fine grains of sand pricked his skin. Now he knew the source of the rustling noise. The wind was blowing sand along with it and it was striking the tent wall.

The commander shook the other men. "Something seems to be brewing up out there," he said. "It'd be best if we prepared ourselves for it."

The unsuspecting colonel could not know that any preparation would be useless in the midst of nature unleashed.

They awakened all the sleeping men. Everson instructed them to double the tent anchoring and put their spacesuits back on.

The only difficulty was with Napoleon. The native had been half-buried by sand in his sleeping hole, and Weiss, who had gone out to inform him of the new situation, nearly stumbled over him. The Green rewarded the

biologist with curses, shook himself like a dog coming out of the water and finally followed Weiss back to the tents, cursing all the while.

“There seems to be a sandstorm coming on,” Everson said into his helmet microphone when Napoleon stood before him. The old native did not react. Everson rearranged the hopeless confusion of microphones and loudspeakers around the bird-creature’s neck, tapped out the sand and tried again.

“Of course it’s a sandstorm,” said Napoleon, irritated. He raised his withered basket-head testingly to the wind.

“What should we do?” asked the spaceman.

The native clicked his beak contemptuously. “Wait,” he said categorically. “what else?”

Everson shrugged. Even the crankiest old Terran would be a kindly senior citizen next to this withered, ancient alien. Either Napoleon suffered from an excess of bile or he had a hopeless case of hardening of the arteries. In any event, the Green was at the moment no more than a quarrelsome, thin old bag of bones from which no useful advice could be expected.

“Everybody back in the tents,” Everson ordered. “Perhaps it won’t be as bad as we fear.”

The wind had already reached a considerable strength and was stubbornly shaking the simple shelters. The plastic of the tents bulged and strained against the wind. The lights of the spacemen flashed in the darkness.

Weiss and Goldstein were already in the tent when Everson crawled back to his sleeping place.

“I hope the fastenings hold,” said the mutant. “I just opened my helmet and the rattling of the tent walls sounds like pistol shots.”

Everson crossed his arms behind his head and stared up at the peaked ceiling. A lamp offered an irregular light.

Suddenly Everson saw the tent roof beginning to turn. There seemed to be two giant hands at work that seemingly wanted to twist the tent like a wet rag. The colonel was on his feet at once.

“Hold tight,” he called. In the light of the lamp he saw that the men were sitting up. Then the beginning hurricane had so deformed the tent that it closed in on Everson from all sides. He felt the force of the wind threatening to demolish him. He grew confused in the folds of the plastic. And then the three of them had dug their way free of the tent. The storm blew everything with it. Everson’s hands, feeling for different objects,

grasped emptiness.

“Stay together!” ordered the colonel, who had grown grey in many years of service.

The air blew with such force that it pressed the spacesuit fabric against the skin wherever it struck the body fully. Everson switched on his lamp. The light was virtually entirely absorbed by the blowing sand, reaching no more than two or three meters. Two sudden gusts in rapid succession threw Everson down. He didn’t dare try to stand up again. Instead he crawled along on his knees. It seemed to him that the ground *was* vibrating under his hands. Weiss crawled next to him. The telepath had vanished, evidently blown some distance away by the gusts of wind. A tent came flying through the air, hitting Everson’s helmet and almost ripping it away from his head. A stabbing pain bored into his neck. Any further movement would be useless. He pressed himself flat into the sand and dug for a handhold.

“Everyone stay where he is,” he called into the microphone. That would certainly not be so simple for some men but the order would prevent everyone from wandering around senselessly in the darkness, looking for a safe place.

The pain ran like a blazing fire along Everson’s back. He had the feeling of lying on a huge, rotating disc. Involuntarily he let out a cry. He realized with growing terror that his feeling had not been a simple case of imagination.

The ground was moving!

The colonel had no time to ponder the meaning of the phenomenon. He had his hands full trying to hold himself fast and resist the storm.

“Glord!” someone shouted. “The ground’s starting to spin!”

The increasing speed of the rotation produced a centrifugal force that together with the raging wind was enough to send Everson sliding over the sand as if it were a sheet of ice. Desperately he struggled to find a handhold. A separated piece of the desert was whirling about like a top and on its surface 30 men slid around like insects and feared they were staring death in the face. Everson had the thought that his position was halfway between the imaginary middle axis and the outer edges of the top. Sooner or later the raging elements would inevitably push him farther and farther ‘outwards’. Terrified, the commander of the *MEXICO* thought of the possibility that there might be a suction force involved, forming a cone in the earth and carrying everything with it. That would mean that they were

no longer on the surface of a disc but on the inner wall of a cone. Everson knew that such manifestations were possible on stormy seas but the conditions for such things did not exist here. Or did they? Couldn't the same forces that had played the grim game with Bellinger be at work here too? Were the invisible beings now finally striking to destroy the audacious Earthmen?

He would find no answer in this howling chaos. He would have already choked to death without his spacesuit. If he were really on the inner wall of a sand cone, then he would be drawn in slow spirals towards the bottom, middle core of the section and then expelled. His body was now bathing in sand. The pain in his neck had subsided to a dull pressure which increased to a stabbing violence at regular intervals. Although he was no more than a helpless plaything of nature unleashed, he fought on unflaggingly against its superior force. He lost all sense of time. There was a rushing in his ears, sounding as though he were standing under a waterfall. His teeth were so tightly clenched that they hurt. A hard object struck against his shoulder. He reached for it and succeeded in taking hold of the thing. It was probably part of the equipment and had been swept across the ground by the wind until it hit him. Everson was no longer a young man and the uninterrupted exertion was tiring him out considerably. He clutched the angular box as though he could obtain strength from it. Then, unexpectedly, something struck his helmet. Colored flashes blitzed in front of his eyes. His hands opened. He noticed that he was being driven on ever faster, then he fell into a bottomless blackness.

* * * *

A buxom woman was busy folding white washcloths.

She did it with great care and her hands were continually smoothing out the fabric.

"He's coming to," said a voice.

Marcus Everson opened his eyes. A bright light blinded him. The woman changed into Dr. Morton, who was busy preparing bandages and meanwhile was ungently prodding the colonel. After several tries, Everson accustomed himself to the sun and could hold his eyes open.

He was lying in the sand. Around him were standing, lying or sitting the other members of the expedition. Their spacesuits made a shabby impression. Everson told himself that he probably did not look much better. He raised his head, then checked the movement at once because a

penetrating pain ran through his neck. Slowly, his memory returned.

Once more, this time with greater care, Everson sat up.

The expedition or rather, what was left of it – found itself in a basin-shaped depression in the middle of the desert.

“Is everybody OK?” he asked with effort.

“Except for the injured, yes,” answered Dr. Morton. “The tents and a large share of the equipment are gone.”

He rolled a bandage up. The viewplate of his helmet was so dirty that his bearded face was difficult to see.

“Almost all the medications are gone, too,” he added.

Everson found himself thinking of someone complaining of losing a tooth filling in the middle of an atomic explosion.

“Where is Napoleon?” he asked.

Morton looked at him sadly. “He’s gone, too,” he said morosely. “Sternal and Weiss have been looking for him but so far they haven’t been able to find him.”

The colonel wanted to look at his watch but it had been a victim of the storm. Dr. Morton noticed the direction of Everson’s glance.

“It’s been light for an hour,” he said. “The men have been able to gradually come together here during the morning. We were in the middle of a rice little whirl-wind... and we look it.”

Everson was used to the physician’s rough and informal style and it could not bother him. If Morton were ever fetched by the Devil – and there could be no doubt that such a fate awaited him – then Hell itself would face a revolution that would shake it to its very foundations.

The condition of the small party was bad but it could have been much worse. Landi was involved with cleaning sand out of the radio, evidence that they could still communicate with the *MEXICO*. But with the disappearance of the old Green, the search for the tower had become an undertaking that made the solution of an Aztec knot puzzle seem like child’s play. Everson thought suddenly and vividly of thirty ants crawling about the main avenue of Terrania, hoping to find and destroy the trap of an ant-lion.

It mattered little what direction they chose to take. There were no reference points to guide them to the legendary tower. They could divide up, spreading out from their present position in a star-like formation, but the farther they went, the greater the distance between the single groups would

be... and thus the danger of missing the tower altogether. There were any number of other possibilities but none seemed especially promising. Because Everson was the kind of man who faced facts squarely, he told himself that the probability of their search being successful was so slight that, mathematically expressed, it was no more than one chance in a million. Not even a positronicon would have given a more favorable result because there simply was not any possible.

Thus he limited his activity for the time being to watching Dr. Morton bandaging the injured men and listening to the doctor's terse explanations. The edges of the hollow in which they found themselves were so high that they blocked all view of the outer world. In effect, they lay on the bottom of a salad bowl.

"What does it look like outside this hole?" Everson asked the doctor. "Have you been able to determine anything that would give us clues about the shape changers?"

"I've been too busy all this time to investigate the hollow," Morton rumbled. "Incidentally, I've seen nothing more of the men who've left the area."

The hollow had an oval shape, having a diameter of about 120 meters along the long axis and 70 along the short. Its side walls led up the desert surface just three meters above the hollow's floor at an angle of roughly 30°. Naturally, the edges were irregular, but at no point so low that one could look over them.

Everson got up, making an effort to hold his head steady. He was only partly successful and he suffered a certain amount of pain as a result. At length he stood fully erect, still somewhat bent and stiff, but he managed to walk nonetheless. He hobbled over to Landi and smiled encouragingly at the radioman. Each step drove a fiery needle into his neck from below. After he had gone 20 meters, it seemed to be 10 needles. Everson wondered how he could walk several kilometers in such a state. He hoped that Dr. Morton had a painkiller for him. Sweat gushed from every pore. But he did not give up and finally reached a place in the hollow's edge that seemed less high and steep than other places. He let himself slowly forward and caught his sluggish fall with his hands. He now lay parallel to the sand wall – but that was all. Lying here was one thing – climbing up from here was another. He moved all his limbs but the only result was that the sand slid away from beneath them, forming a small depression. As usual, Everson thought bitterly, it was the simplest of problems that was rendering him helpless. He tried to climb with his feet alone, driving them into the sand

and trying to push himself up. When he had slid back a few times, he recognized the idea for what it was: miserable. Trying to pull himself up by his hands had roughly the same results. Everson hopped like a giant frog... with the difference that a frog would have moved ahead while the colonel remained in one place.

"I'll support you," said a voice in the helmet receiver.

Everson turned his head and saw Poul Weiss standing behind him. The biologist reached his side with athletic skill.

"Use me as a ladder," said Weiss, entwining his hands so that Everson could put his foot into them. Everson was large and weighed 190 pounds. Weiss bent somewhat at the knee as the colonel burdened him with his full weight plus that of the spacesuit. Even so, that was still not high enough for Everson to have a free view of the surrounding terrain.

"Climb on my shoulders," Weiss suggested.

Everson made an effort not to reward the man's helpfulness with a botched attempt. Somehow he worked his way up. When he reached the top, the pain and exertion had so exhausted him that he had to close his eyes for a moment.

"Do you see something, sir?" asked his living support.

Everson stared into the desert. At first he saw only sand and flickering brightness. Then, as he turned his head a little to the side, he saw something else. He blinked in confusion and glanced back into the hollow in the hope the mirage would be gone when he looked at it for a second time. But that which had been seen the first time still stood 100 meters from their current location.

Weiss wavered somewhat and Everson had to cling to the upper edge of the hollow.

"Do you see something?" Weiss repeated impatiently.

"Yes," Everson answered slowly. And then, after a significant pause intended to impart the full scale of the wonder to the biologist, he added drily: "The tower!"

6.

TRAPPED IN THE TOWER

Weiss gave a cry of surprise, nearly throwing off his burden in the excitement.

“Careful!” Everson reminded.

The tower, which according to Napoleon’s claims had been another two days’ march away, was to be found directly in front of them. Either the old Green’s information had been wrong, or the preceding night’s hurricane – and that seemed to Everson the less likely answer – had brought them here in some mysterious fashion.

The building, stretching high into the hot morning sky of Moluk not far from the spacemen, was impressive. At first glance, it seemed strange and uncanny. There was no possibility that it could have been built by the Greens. It reared about 150 meters above the ground. A horizontal cross-section, as far as Everson could see, would have shown that the tower had 8 corners. Constant attacks by storms and hurricanes had forced it somewhat to the side, and certainly only deep-reaching, stable foundations kept it from toppling.

For some time that could not be estimated, wind, sand, heat and cold had eaten away at the tower. It was covered with a grey-green coating. In some places there were cracks as wide as a hand and a meter long. There was an air of endless abandonment about the structure. It seemed to Everson like the monument of a long-forgotten giant who wanted to impress himself ineradicably on the memories of unknown beings. Whoever had been the architect here, he had not come from Moluk.

Still half-entranced by the impressive sight, Everson climbed back into the hollow. If he had ever seen a curious face, then it was Weiss’. He chose not to make any premature comments.

“Come with me to the others,” he said to the biologist. “I don’t want to have to repeat myself.”

Weiss registered his disappointment by kicking the sand but followed his commander. The other spacemen had been watching and waited eagerly.

“We’ve reached the tower,” Everson began tersely and reported briefly what he had seen.

“What are we going to do now, sir?” asked Bellinger, who had probably

suffered more than anyone else the night before.

“We’ll go over and investigate the building. Beforehand, however, we want to see if Mr. Landi can make contact with the *MEXICO*. We don’t know what’s in store for us and a certain amount of covering our rear won’t hurt anything.”

It was simple to listen to, less simple to put into practice. Was there any sort of opening at all through which one could make one’s way inside the tower? Everson had not seen any. Of course there might be a door or other entranceway on the other side. Nor was there much to be done about getting help from the spaceship. Even if after great difficulty they managed to make their position known to Scoobey, it would still be a long time before the First Officer could arrive on the scene with an auxiliary squad of men.

No matter how one looked at it, they were left to their own resources.

“You can talk with the *MEXICO* any time now,” Landi announced. He stroked almost lovingly the device, some parts of which were held in place by Dr. Morton’s bandages. Everson tried to overlook the improvisation.

“I had to fix it a little,” Landi said with the intrepidity of a South Seas islander wanting to make his canoe watertight with the addition of a few leaves. Besides, it was radio technology’s version of fraud to speak loftily of ‘fixing’ when at best it was an aborted attempt to bring medical help to bear on something that was already dead.

“Very well,” the colonel decided with a distrustful side glance at Landi’s work. “We won’t lose anything by trying it.”

Despite his gloomy expectations, the radio man made audio contact with the *MEXICO* after two minutes. Scoobey reported that the ship had also fallen into a branch of the storm but had not suffered any damage. The technicians were proceeding well with their work and the First Officer believed that the repairs would take only a few more days to complete. In this respect, their early pessimism had not been justified.

Scoobey received a detailed report about the state of the expedition. The radio gave the men in the ship a way to find them if necessary without any known position coordinates or tracking signal device.

In conclusion the colonel said: “There is no doubt there are forces at work here for which we are no match at all should they attack us in earnest. I am going to try to get into the tower with my men. Perhaps we will find further clues there.”

Everson spent the next few minutes being treated by Dr. Morton. The

physician tried to dampen the pain enough that the commander could move normally.

“We will all proceed to the vicinity of the tower,” Everson said, announcing his next plans. “Bellinger, Goldstein, Weiss, Sternal and I will see if we can’t get inside it. We’ll arrange with the others a period of time within which we must return.”

It seemed that all the spacemen had withstood the terrible night relatively well. Since they helped one another, they all were able to climb out of the hollow. With the appearance of the huge structure, Everson had trouble interrupting the ensuing discussion.

Thirty meters in front of their goal, Bellinger stopped suddenly. He pointed at the ground with outstretched hand. “Tracks, sir,” he said.

Everson pushed his way next to him. The lieutenant had not been deceived. Half blown-over prints of broad, four-toed feet were to be seen in the sand. There was only one individual who could have made them: Napoleon!

But the Green had vanished. There could be no doubt about the direction of the tracks: they led straight to the mysterious structure. Had Napoleon been kidnapped or had he gone there of his own free will? They were questions whose answers Everson did not know. But his confusion was to be increased even more.

“The tower, sir!” cried Landi.

“What about it?” asked the large man.

The radio man’s answer solved one riddle, it was true, but at the same time posed an infinite number of new ones. Landi’s realization was so surprisingly simple – and besides that so clearly obvious – that Everson wondered why no one had realized it long before this.

“The tower,” said Landi, “is a spaceship.”

* * * *

Not much fantasy or imagination was necessary to add detail to that conclusion: it was a spaceship that had crashed. Even if one assumed that a part of it was buried in the ground, it was still no especially large ship by Terran standards. It was slightly more than 40 meters wide at its base. That was still no reason to underestimate the ship or its builders. Danger could not be reckoned according to size. If this was the emigrants’ ship of molecular transformites mentioned in Mataal’s notes, then its size was utterly meaningless.

"You're right," said Everson after awhile.

As they came nearer to it, they made out other details. The actual outer hull of the alien ship was covered with a thin sandy crust. Beneath the grey-green layer emerged a black color of varying tone. Napoleon's tracks led around the ship. Despite intensive thought about the matter, Everson could not imagine what connection the Green had to recent events.

On the other side they came across an opening. It was round, its diameter just two meters, and was located about the level of one's knee above the ground. Beyond was darkness, not even broken by the diagonally-falling sunlight far enough that one could see anything.

"Can you make out any mental impulses or thought patterns?" Everson asked the mutant.

"No, sir," answered Goldstein. "There doesn't seem to be anyone here."

"My orders are clear," said the colonel. "If Sammy, Sternal, Weiss, the lieutenant and I are not back outside in an hour, inform Mr. Scoobey at once. Do not follow us under any circumstances."

Without hesitating, he swung into the opening.

At first he thought a breath of cool air had touched his face but that was his imagination for his helmet was closed. He glanced back and saw Poul Weiss put his leg inside.

At the same time, a suction grabbed him and ripped him upwards.

He whirled head over heels like a piece of paper caught in a warm air shaft. Fortunately he did not collide with anything. Out of pure instinct his hands reached out in the darkness in the hope of finding something to hold on to.

Naturally it was not suction as such but a counterpoled forcefield that had cancelled out gravity. A magnetic traction pulled him upwards. Everson, in whose mind these thoughts only slowly formed, knew that there were still other possibilities. There could also be paramechanical forces at work. An oppressive feeling gripped his chest. Suddenly he felt a gentle jerk and was pushed to the side. He immediately felt a solid floor beneath his feet. Normal gravitation was again in effect.

The colonel now found himself in a room about four meters wide and twice that long, illuminated by hidden light sources. The walls were of an undefined color and the floor and ceiling were white. The spaceman turned around and saw a rectangular opening in the wall, through which he had probably come. The room was entirely empty except for an odd thing at Everson's feet.

The object looked something like a circus performer's rolling wheel, having 2 rims separated at chest width by supporting crossbars. Before Everson could examine it more closely, someone ran into him from behind. He gave a start but it was only Weiss, who had come stumbling out of the shaft.

"Well, here we are," he said unnecessarily. "A fast and comfortable way of getting from one place to another, don't you think?"

Everson could not share his enthusiasm. Nor were Sternal, Bellinger and Goldstein, who came in right after one another, very happy about their reception, either.

"Snap!" said Bellinger. "The mousetrap has been triggered!"

"What's that?" asked Sternal, pointing to the roller wheel.

"It could be anything at all," said the lieutenant, bending down to look at it more closely. He touched it and then shook it. It did not move.

"Pfllllrtsch!" exclaimed something in their receivers.

"The shaft!" cried Goldstein. "Where is it?"

The opening through which they had come seemed to have dissolved. Around them stretched smooth, seamless walls.

"Nonsense," said Everson, disturbed. "Someone's closed the entrance."

His words had the opposite effect of what he intended. The men shouted in confusion and began to feel around the walls like madmen, trying to find the shaft. Everson could understand that they were not happy to be locked in but they would not regain their freedom this way.

"Stop!" he called. "This is useless."

Was it possible that the events had not been caused by a living being but by a still-functioning machine that put its pre-programmed measures into effect upon the entrance of aliens into the ship?

"We come in peace!" Everson shouted. "We want to parley."

He waited but no answer came. An alien intelligence would have had to assume he was talking with his companions. The fact their lives had so far been spared was a weak consolation.

The 'wheel' began to glow before their eyes. Its color became a bright yellow. Everson bent over it. The temperature on his armband thermometer remained constant at 43°. Suddenly the colonel had the impression of looking into a mirror. Dizziness clutched him. He wanted to pull himself away from the sight. His lips opened to cry out a warning to the men but his vocal cords failed him. The image he saw was three-dimensional. As

his eyes narrowed to make it out more clearly, the reflection came closer to him. A room of enormous proportions opened up before him.

Then a voice sounded, echoing in his receivers like rolling thunder: "What do you want here?"

Some time went by before Everson was fully aware of the fact that it had been Sammy Goldstein who had spoken. Desperately he forced himself away from the near-hypnotic power of the strange image. His body was coated with sweat. Goldstein was hanging limply in Bellinger's arms, apparently unconscious.

"He simply collapsed," said Weiss lowly.

"Someone asked a question through him," said Everson slowly.

"I don't understand, sir," said the biologist in confusion. "What do you mean by that?"

The disturbed expressions on the faces of Bellinger and Sternal gave the colonel the certainty that only he had heard the mutant's voice... in his mind. He was neither telepathic nor gifted in any other way with paranormal powers. That could only mean that the thing over which he was bending had put the question mentally to him.

Exactly on the opposite side an opening appeared in the wall and saved Everson the trouble of answering. They went around the wheel, Bellinger carefully pulling the considerably lighter Goldstein behind him. They left the room together, stepping through the man-sized opening. Now they found themselves in a tube-like corridor. From the ceiling hung several cone-shaped objects. Spiraling tubes wound their way around and through them. In the walls could be seen three-cornered depressions in groups of four. The floor was rough in texture and looked like large grains of sand. At intervals there were irregular plates that gave off a pale light.

Something was moving at the end of the corridor. Everson strained to make it out clearly. A withered, fragile-looking figure approached them. They stopped, waiting. The being came closer, although the Terrans had the impression it might break apart on the next step.

It was Napoleon!

* * * *

The Green tottered its way towards them. At its throat the communication units still dangled. The wrinkled gourd-shaped head looked even uglier in the strange light than before. All the suffering of this planet seemed to be

engraved in its ancient face.

If Napoleon had suddenly appeared in the breakfast room of the Hilton-Chevalier in Paris, the exclusive guests could not have been more surprised than Everson and his men. Of course the Green could have gotten there by the same means the spacemen had practically been forced to take. Everson thought feverishly. The simplest way to find out would be to ask the native.

Before the colonel could do so, Napoleon's voice could be heard in their helmet loudspeakers. "I consider it best to meet you in this form, since it is already familiar to you," said the Green with a firm, steady voice. "Why should I shock your already strained nerves unnecessarily?"

"What are you talking about?" stammered Everson. Had the Green gone crazy? Was he under hypnotic influence? Was someone using him as a tool?

An outstretched arm with a shockpistol flashed into Everson's range of vision. The arm belonged to Weiss, whose face looked grimly tense beneath the viewplate. The commander of the *MEXICO* knocked the biologist's hand to one side.

"The young man is somewhat excited," commented Napoleon, or whoever it was, with an indulgent voice.

"We mustn't condemn him for that. By the way, you can take your uncomfortable spacesuits off. The air on board this ship will seem to you as a pleasant refreshment." He folded his arms, clicked a little with his beak and continued in a tone of self-satisfaction. "Anyway, you'll have to get used to the atmosphere of this planet sooner or later because you will never leave it."

Now it was Everson himself who pulled his thermobeamer and aimed it at the old one's chest. "Says who?" demanded the colonel.

Napoleon gestured disparagingly. Somehow all his fragility and aged weakness had fallen away from him.

"Threatening me with a weapon is not even half as dangerous for me as you no doubt think. If you shoot, there is no limit to what I can do. I can disappear, absorb the energy and give it off again, destroy the beamer, cripple your hand, set up a barrier between us or make you explode. Those are only a few examples. Remember Bellinger or the tornado and then you will realize that your weapon cannot trouble me."

Their quest had not been for naught. They had found those from whom Perry Rhodan was hoping for help. For there was no doubt that Napoleon was a molecular transformite. He could not know that with the exception of

Lt. Bellinger, the men standing before him had had a certain amount of experience with another member of his race.

“Don’t think that I regard you as enemies,” Napoleon assured them. “You are only means to an end for me. The astonishing chance that led you to this planet will be my salvation. Now if you will follow me, gentlemen!”

He moved his hand and an opening formed in the wall that was large enough to let them through. Goldstein was still unconscious. The room that they now entered was bathed in a pleasant light.

“I’m sure you’ll want to sit down in comfort,” said the Green – no, the shape changer, Everson mentally corrected himself.

As though from nothing, five chairs materialized before them. Napoleon gestured, inviting them to sit.

“If you wish I can change the form of the stools. You need only tell me what sort you would like. As for myself, I prefer to stand.”

The entire performance was meant only to disconcert and intimidate them. Everson vowed not to be cowed by visual impressions. At the moment, the line between the two sides had to be drawn.

“Your spacesuits,” Napoleon reminded them in a friendly tone.

Everson knew that resistance was pointless for the time being. He took off his suit and indicated for the others to follow his example. Bellinger peeled the unconscious mutant out of his clumsy spacesuit and raised him into one of the chairs. Napoleon waited until they had all taken their seats.

“There are two possibilities for us,” began the pseudo-native. “Either we will work together in a friendly manner, and I promise you that you will live out your days on Moluk very well, or you can resist my wishes and in that case I will have to carry out my plans by means of force.”

“Those words can come as easily from me to you, said Everson coolly. “Therefore I don’t have to repeat them.”

“Your courage has no relation to your possibilities,” answered Napoleon gently. “I don’t wish to deprive you of your unjustified hopes but you will soon realize that you are in no way a match for me. Let me briefly summarize now how I came to be in my position.”

Goldstein came slowly to and lolled uneasily in his seat. Everson bent over to the telepath and shook him.

The mutant opened his eyes. “Napoleon!” he whispered. “What happened?”

“The Green is a shape changer,” said Everson in English. “Be careful,

Sammy.”

“I’m aware of your friend’s weak ability,” said Napoleon indolently. “There is no use in warning him. He cannot hurt me.”

Everson remembered Mataal with a grim smile. Even he had been defeated by Goldstein, although giving the mutant paramechanical powers had been suicide in a certain sense.

“I am in the unenviable position of being the last of my people,” Napoleon began. “That need not bring forth expressions of sympathy from you. I’ve had enough time to get over my sorrow. One can learn to bear loneliness. This ship was to have set 5000 members of my race down on Moluk. That did take place. Instead, all except five officers were dead! Our ship struck the planet’s surface with the impact of a meteor. I must point out here that the drive of our ships is a mixture of technical and paramechanical forces, which working together produce incomparable results. The parapilots suddenly realized in the upper levels of Moluk’s atmosphere that their connection to the engines had suddenly been broken off. A mental force that could not be overcome was forcing itself on us. We lost all control. Within seconds all our abilities had completely vanished. All attempts to save ourselves were in vain. We were in the position of a mountain climber who is unexpectedly blinded while walking along a dangerous cliff and is doomed to fall. I activated what remained of my power to brace myself for the crash. Perhaps that was what saved me. The other four who survived along with me were so severely injured that they died within a short time. Our dampened paranormal abilities had not been able to help us. After awhile the pressure gradually subsided somewhat. Meanwhile I had been able to locate its source, for I could localize some thought-patterns in the broad attack-front. My knowledge had come much too late to be of any aid to my race. The natives radiated a sort of parawaves that effectively blocked any similar waves given off by other beings. Naturally the primitive creatures suspected nothing. More and more I was increasingly able to overcome the force. That was a matter of life and death for me because I had in any case to enter into contact with the natives to stay alive. I don’t want to relate now what difficulty I had in approaching the village. The closer I came to the Greens, the stronger their mental influence became. Even so, I was able to assume the form of the comical old fellow you see here before you. He was living at the edge of the village even then and enjoyed the formadvantageous reputation of being immortal. The Greens don’t get very old but I, Napoleon, could live forever without exciting any suspicion! The body of the old crank saved me the trouble of

making a new imitation with each generation. In the village I could activate my abilities only with indescribable difficulty. That's why I came back here now and then. So that the natives would not get the idea of wandering in the desert and sniffing around in the vicinity of the ship, I caused some things to happen that were wonders in their eyes. From that time on they stayed in the neighborhood of the village."

He paused. His dark eyes shone. When none of the five men said anything, he continued. "It was impossible for me to make the ship ready to take off on my own. The repair work would have presented a problem to experienced paramedics. Moreover, I had no training as a parapilot. The mental force of the Greens might increase the higher one went, although that was only an assumption on my part that later proved to be wrong. Nonetheless, there was no chance of my ever leaving Moluk. I sat vegetating, living a life without sense or purpose. Shortly after this ship took off, my home world exploded. Our scientists had wanted to make it independent of the sun. They erected enormous domes and ignited the planetary interior by bringing different elements into an atomic fusion process. The atom fire was to be kept in check by paramedical control – that is to say, it was supposed to have been kept in check. However, there were evidently tiny traces of unknown materials that had not been included in the original calculations simply because we weren't aware of them. It was not long before the fusion of two different atoms was taking place beneath the surface of the planet. That was the beginning of the end. The atom fire expanded in uncountable branches out from the source, growing rapidly like an ulcer, expanding invisibly farther and farther until it finally broke through the surface. The planet exploded just one day later. The last attempt of our dying race to preserve itself ended instead in its total destruction."

Napoleon ended his commentary for a second time. Somewhat numbed, Everson sat up straight. He gulped. He had been involved in cosmic events long enough to understand the scale of the terrible catastrophe perfectly. Sympathy could help the molecular transformite no longer. He was a lost and lonely creature, embittered by the tragic end of his race. Opposed to the destruction of this unique species, the fact that the mission of the *MEXICO* was for nothing lost almost all its meaning. An alliance with the shape changers was impossible... because there weren't any left. Napoleon was the last representative of these beings. Perry Rhodan had sent in vain the ultrafast cruiser to Moluk with its special mission. During the time of the operation, 150 experienced spacemen were tied up where they could be of

no help to the Earth – and the result was precisely zero. 20,000 light-years separated them from the place where they were urgently needed. Rhodan and his most loyal aides would certainly have not been so foolish as to plan on an alliance with an unknown race in their actions. There was no doubt about the failure of the expedition. There was even the danger that the *MEXICO* and 150 men would be lost completely, among the latter a mutant and a colonel.

“When my apathy had gotten to the point where I did nothing but spend my days in my miserable hut, the miracle happened,” Napoleon went on. “An alien spaceship penetrated the atmosphere of Moluk. It was not hard for me to find out that it used an antigrav field to make its landing. I developed a feverish activity. I overcame the radiations of the Greens and made parapsychic contact with the ship. I succeeded in finding the forcefield’s control switch and bringing it under my paramechanical control. I waited until the vessel was close enough to the ground that a fall would not destroy it and it would be spaceworthy again after a few repairs. Then I switched off the antigrav field. The rest you know, gentlemen.”

“He attacked the *MEXICO*!” cried Bellinger angrily, drawing his paralysers. “He needs to be taught a lesson.”

Before Everson could intervene, the Lieutenant had pulled his weapon out completely and fired. At the same time, Bellinger’s chair dematerialised and the heavy man tumbled to the floor. In any other situation it would have had a comic effect. The shot dissipated harmlessly. Bellinger picked himself up quickly.

“We won’t get anywhere that way, Lieutenant,” Everson told him. “It would be best if you were to restrain your temper.”

Somewhat ashamed, Bellinger looked for a new place to sit. However, after what he had done Napoleon did not seem willing to grant him any favors.

Everson looked at his watch. One hour had gone by and with it the time he had told Landi to wait. He wanted to inform Napoleon of this arrangement but the molecular transformite was just then in the process of disappearing. He did it by simply falling through the floor. The sight was so eerie that Sternal cried out in terror. Hardly had Napoleon disappeared when Bellinger fell to the place where he had been standing. The Lieutenant’s hands found only solid matter.

“I think we’re now something like his prisoners,” said Poul Weiss slowly and emphatically.

Everson felt that those words flattered the situation. He had come to the

conclusion that Napoleon was following a definite purpose. He wanted to win the *MEXICO* for himself and leave the spacemen to something with which they would certainly not be happy: a life among the long-legged Greens.

* * * *

At that same second in which Col. Marcus Everson looked at his watch, about 50 meters below in the midst of the desert sand Antonio Landi raised his voice and said: "The time has elapsed."

Twenty-four pairs of eyes looked in dark threat at the alien ship that had swallowed up five astronauts and so far not allowed them to go free. Although the commander had given specific orders, every single one of them was ready to risk his life by plunging into the unseen calamity. The respect and the affection the men had for Everson was matched by very few other commanders in the Solar Fleet. Each of his men idolized him. He knew how to allow a large measure of freedom and demand only the most necessary of discipline without undermining his own authority. He spoke with the youngest cadet in just as friendly a fashion as with his officers and he upbraided them equally if they were guilty of doing something wrong.

So it was not surprising that in this moment various men reached for their thermobeams.

"Keep cool, men," Landi said, although he would have joyfully stormed the eight-cornered wreck rising high before them into the pale green sky. "First we'll speak with Mr. Scoobey."

He busied himself with that which hardly deserved to be called a 'radio' any more. Untroubled, as though the device were the most stable and rugged model on the market, the radio-man's rough fingers flew through the necessary adjustments of the switches. When the voice of the First Officer of the *MEXICO* sounded over the receiver, there was no longer anyone who would not have sworn that Antonio Landi was a first-class genius.

"Six minutes have already gone by since the time we agreed upon ran out, sir," said Landi. "The commander and his companions have still not returned. Everything is alright with us. What should we do?"

Landi, who once would have liked to become an officer or even a commander, thanked his lucky stars that he had chosen a different course. He tried to imagine what he would do if he were the one to make a decision instead of the officer. No matter how hard he thought, no idea came to him

that seemed even halfway reasonable.

Walt Scoobey seemed to suffer similar difficulties, for some time went by before he spoke again. "Send the two robots into the ship," he said, "and have them search for the men."

The idea was good – only there were no longer any robots. They had been lost in the previous night's sandstorm along with many other objects, something which should not have been able to happen to combatrobots. Landi explained it to his unseen discussion partner.

"Puuh!" said Scoobey. It sounded as though he had heavy physical labor to perform. "Send four more men into the ship, Tony. That way we can stop, and occupy the invisible enemy for awhile. The rest of you should take the radio and pull back a bit – let's say to the limit of your range of sight. Observe anything that takes place. Above all, keep your radio in constant operation from now on. We'll track its signal and find you quickly that way. I'm going to assemble a small party of men here and send it out to you as fast as possible. We'll be equipped according to the circumstances. Perhaps we'll succeed in getting one of the lifeboats out. Over and out."

Landi confirmed the reception. He adjusted the radio so that it broadcast a brief call sign every 10 seconds which could be picked up by any receiving unit within a radius of 500 kilometers. "Four volunteers," he said then. "We already have one." He indicated himself.

"If I may permit myself as a civilian to make a comment," Dr. Morton broke in, "then I would say that you ought to remain with your ailing device so that you can repair it if it breaks down again. Since, on the other hand, the health situation of the group is as good as can be expected under the circumstances, I see no reason why I should not go."

It was undoubtedly the longest and most polite statement that Dr. Morton had ever made in his entire life. Certainly that was not the only reason no one contradicted him.

"Agreed," said the radio man. "Delaney, Pentstevan, and Tanaka will go with you, Doc. Good luck."

The young Pentstevan proved once again that he had not often endured such dangers for he shook Landi's hand, deeply moved. Before the astronomer could dramatize the scene any further, the doctor pushed him in the direction of the ship.

"Go ahead!" he snorted. "What are you waiting for, boy?"

Four men trudged through the sand towards the opening that still separated

them from their unknown opponent. One by one they disappeared into it. Pentsteven was last to go in and before he did he turned and waved.

A gesture of goodbye can be valid for a short while or forever. In this case, Landi thought troubledly, it looks like forever.

* * * *

During the entire existence of mankind there have been prisoners. With space travel and the appearance of alien intelligences, that fact had been given new variations. Till now men had always been locked away by their fellows; now it was possible for another species to take men into custody. The taking of prisoners was a vice that had spread widely all over the galaxy, assuming every imaginable form. Uncountable variations had been added to the simple phrase 'put behind bars'. In the passage of time, some number of prisons had been so arranged that their inmates noticed nothing at all of their regrettable situation. But that was true only in the rarest cases. Generally, those who operated prisons were most concerned that their victims knew what was happening to them.

Just as old as the institution of men in confinement is the thought of escape. Even Stone Age man schemed to escape from the cave of his enemy. The more complicated the dungeon, the more refined the plans for escape. At length there were penitentiaries which were renowned for the fact no one had ever escaped from them. There was not the slightest possibility of obtaining the desired freedom before the wardens were willing to let the prisoner go. If, however, one of the prisoners burrowed his way out under the wall, the penitentiary's good name was ruined. There were invented time-locks, electronic barriers and impenetrable walls and they were built into the prisons. And astounding as it may seem, there were still escapes. No system however well-devised could destroy a prisoner's will to escape. Even in an age of scientific perfection and supertechnological installations, there were still men who responded to the limitation of their freedom by escaping. The feeling of being locked in is one of the worst feelings a person can have. The feeling of hope is stronger, however...

* * * *

"We've got to get out of here somehow," said Werner Sternal. "In any case, we've got to try. It's better to do something than sit around here waiting for our friend to come back to us."

Bellinger would have liked to note that for him the phrase was '*stand*

around' but Everson spoke first. "Our bad luck is that even the opening is gone," said the Colonel. "Napoleon can move through walls if he wants to." He turned to Sammy Goldstein. "Can you make mental contact with the shape changer?" he asked. "Can you sense where he is now or if he's approaching?"

The mutant made a vague gesture with his arm. Like all telepaths, he was sensitive and suffered unspeakably with the slightest change in his usual abilities. "No matter what I tell you," he said slowly, "how can you know I'm not being influenced when I say it? My information is of no use to you because you are distrustful of me. You will always remember how I was possessed by Mataal. The same thing is possible now, too. We don't know. What I tell you might lead you astray. Therefore any report from me will only confuse you."

Everson realized that the mutant was right. It was now completely senseless to rely on him. Goldstein would speak only when he was sure of what he was saying. And even then Everson would not be able to believe him.

Meanwhile Weiss and Sternal had stood up and together with Bellinger they were examining the walls. They felt every centimeter they could, although their hands could not reach to the ceiling.

Finally Poul Weiss reached a place that he began to inspect with especial thoroughness. "We came through here," he said. "There must be a door here or whatever you want to call it."

"Napoleon could have just as easily created the entrance solely for the purpose of bringing us in here," said Everson. "That does not necessarily mean the opening still exists."

"Don't start that, sir!" exclaimed Bellinger shrilly. "In a few hours you'll be asking yourself if even this room exists at all. When you begin that train of thought, you end up denying the entire world around you."

Dismayed, Everson registered the panic-like excitement of the Lieutenant. He went over to Weiss. The biologist was working unflaggingly. Even if they were to unexpectedly succeed in escaping from here, Everson thought, what would they do then? Beyond the room was a corridor, beyond that another room. If they made an escape, they would not be changing their situation; just their position. It would be the same as if a prisoner at Sing Sing had tunneled out from under his cell, only to emerge in the guardroom.

"Done!" exulted Weiss.

Everson blinked in confusion. To him the wall still presented an impenetrable surface unbroken by anything.

“What are we waiting for now?” asked Weiss.

Bellinger snorted. Sternal gave Everson a meaningful glance. The young mutant shook his head. With the exception of Weiss, no one could see anything through which one could disappear.

“Let’s talk this over first,” said Everson cautiously. “How did you succeed in finding the entrance?”

Weiss smiled wanly. “It may sound ridiculous,” he said, “but I had firmly wished for an opening there – and there was one.”

“Interesting,” murmured the Colonel. He wondered why of all people it had to be the biologist who was losing his grip, the very man who had been the most sensible of all.

“I think I’ll go take a look outside,” Weiss announced.

Poor fellow, thought Everson, you’re going to have a nasty surprise when you bang your head against solid matter.

But it was Everson who had a surprise coming.

Weiss simply went through the wall.

* * * *

Dr. Morton switched on his light and looked around. Behind him was the entrance. They had climbed in to look out at the desert once more from this point. Pentstevens stepped next to the doctor, swinging his light like a tennis racket and twisting his head all around to see where the light fell. Sgt. Delaney, a small, thickset man, shone his light on the floor. Eiji Tanaka, the astronaut, had thrust his thumbs in his belt and waited.

Next to him was an opening large enough to bring an elephant through. It was not sealed off and it was dark. Tangential to the opening, several metal supports of varying diameters led upwards. At a height of 10 meters they met a bulkhead in which another corridor could be seen. On the walls the men found countless swellings and depressions whose meaning no one could even guess.

“We’ll climb up the poles,” said Dr. Morton. With the agility of an ape he embraced one of the supports and began to pull himself upwards. Pentstevens followed as the second man. The astronomer was in no way the doctor’s athletic equal and had to pause for rest. He was hanging under the bulkhead like an overripe fruit. The impatient calls of Sgt. Delaney finally

encouraged him to swing over to the doctor. Tanaka and the Sergeant overcame the hindrance without difficulty.

“What are we going to do now?” asked Pentstevan. His voice had involuntarily sunk to a whisper.

Before anyone could answer, a weak call for help sounded in their receivers. Four beams of light bored into the darkness.

“It could be a trap,” warned Dr. Morton. The lights’ glare found a figure writhing on the floor. “It’s the Green!” cried Pentstevan. “Look, Doc!” They ran to the moaning Napoleon. The grizzled face of the native was distorted with pain. Evidently someone had beaten him brutally. Dr. Morton bent down over him.

“Quiet now,” he said. “We’ll help you, old friend.” Napoleon raised his thin arms defensively. In the harsh light, his eyes seemed like bottomless seas in deep pits. His breath came as a rattle. “You must help your friends,” he croaked with effort. He turned over to point out the direction to the doctor. “They’re down there with the demons. Hurry!”

Dr. Morton leaped up, colliding with the astronomer, who had been looking over his shoulder. Sgt. Delaney had pulled his thermobeamer and looked around wildly.

“Back!” ordered Dr. Morton. “We’ve got to go down again.”

He stroked Napoleon’s ugly head. “We’ll come back,” he promised.

They hastened away, the flashing glare of their lights streaking across the walls. They did not see the Green stand up and vanish into the blackness.

* * * *

“Since we all saw the same thing, it must have happened,” said Marcus Everson, regarding his companions with an earnest look. “So we must agree that Poul went through this wall as though it were not there.”

No one answered him. Everyone was hanging on his speculations. If he could not obtain any allies for Rhodan. Everson had decided, he wanted at least to bring the valuable cruiser back. That was easier said than done. The obstacles seemed insurmountable. Napoleon doubtlessly intended to get his hands on the *MEXICO*. Even a shape changer could not guide a spaceship through space by himself. He would need help. Everson could imagine just about what the pseudo-native had in mind. He would put the members of the expedition out of the way and return to the *MEXICO* as the ‘sole survivor’. Like Mataal, he would try to be on board the spacer when it took

off. Once out in space, he would bring the crew under his control and force the men to carry out his wishes. In any event, he seemed to have in mind leaving the most important men behind on Moluk. That showed that he looked at least at the mutant as a certain danger.

But it was a luxury to think any more about it; they had to find a way out of their situation. Poul Weiss was not fitted out with supernatural powers. There had to be a rational explanation.

Just as Everson began to consider it seriously, the biologist came back in the same way he had left.

“Let’s go, sir,” he said, eager for action. “The corridor is completely deserted. Napoleon isn’t around.”

It didn’t happen every day that a normal Terran went through the walls of an alien spaceship as though they were air. Some seconds passed before the Colonel could collect himself well enough to ask a question. “How did you do that, Poul? I mean, how did you manage to leave this room?”

Guilt and a poorly suppressed smile mixed on Weiss’ face to form a grimace. “I’m sorry, sir,” he said. “I thought you *knew*.”

“Give us some time to take it in,” recommended Lt. Bellinger sarcastically.

“At the point where we came in,” explained Weiss, a wall simply does not exist. It exists only in our poor, misled brains. The molecular transformite suggested to us by a psycho-trick that the opening closed. We were so convinced of it that we could even *feel* the solid matter – or rather, we believed we could feel it.”

He grinned, stepped back a few paces and put his arm through apparently solid matter.

“Here,” he said, “is the proof. You have only to believe that there is a gap here through which we can go.”

“Let’s try it out anyway,” suggested Bellinger. With outstretched hands that demonstrated his suspicion well enough, he ran towards the barrier – and disappeared. His head appeared once more, looking like a grinning Buddha head covered in defiance of all tradition with curly hair. He nodded encouragingly.

Shortly thereafter, they stood together in the corridor.

“We came from there,” said Weiss. “The barrier seems to be stable.” He pointed to a dark spot whose midpoint was almost black while at the edges it frayed out like a blossom. “Even the thermobeamers will not help us any farther.”

Everson pointed to the colored spot. "Have you already tried?"

Weiss nodded. He did not seem to be especially afraid of the consequences of his fire. He moved with the casualness of someone walking through Goshun Street in Terrania. The biologist was a slim man of average height in whose face hardly any irregularity could be seen. From the outside he seemed attractive and sympathetic. Young, inexperienced spacemen tended constantly to turn to him for advice.

"We can't see the other end of the corridor from here because it isn't light enough," he said. "But we can go over there and look around a little."

"Alright," Everson agreed. He went to the head of the small group and they walked towards their distant destination, unconsciously avoiding making any noise as they went. The corridor narrowed somewhat but a man could walk comfortably.

"There's one thing I'd like to know," murmured Sternal. "Are we moving vertically or horizontally in respect to the desert surface?"

"Try to find a window," Bellinger suggested, grinning.

Goldstein was the only one who was silent. It could almost be believed that he had no interest in the escape. His attention seemed to be focused inwards. The mutant had never been particularly talkative but he had rarely ever seemed so uninvolved before.

"We can go on," Everson exclaimed. "The opening isn't closed on this side."

The others looked past his broad back.

"It looks as though we'll have to go on our way in the dark," said Sternal worriedly. "It gets dark beyond the opened bulkhead."

"Switch on your lights," Everson ordered. It turned out, however, that with the exception of the colonel, everyone had left their lights back with their spacesuits.

"No one is going back," the commander of the *MEXICO* decided. "This one light will have to do."

He switched it on. A beam of light trembled over the floor, felt along the walls and flitted briefly under the ceiling. Their surroundings had not changed. They went along now somewhat more slowly. Everson had drawn his shocker. Their action was of course somewhat planless but it was still much better than resigning themselves to their fate.

All of a sudden Everson sank. His last step had been into nothingness even though he had illuminated the floor shortly before with his light. The

sensation of falling made his stomach queasy. The lamp in his wildly swinging hand described fiery circles in the black void through which he fell. Someone cried out. Shortly thereafter came the muffled sound of a body hitting the floor.

A demonic face appeared clearly visible in Everson's mind. He drew back from it but it came nearer. For a desperate moment came the thought that perhaps he was not falling but floating weightless. The hard, beak-like lips of the face parted. Everson gasped for air. He wanted to struggle but there was no place to begin. He rolled about, somersaulted, fell backwards, reeled forwards. His body could not adjust to this condition.

And then a voice spoke from the unfathomable darkness – a voice that had grown beyond its youth. "This is all only a trick, sir! Fight against it – we'll take care of it!"

"Goldstein!" Everson wanted to cry out but he could get only a tortured moan past his lips. Instinctively he felt something building up around him that would be decisive.

He could not know that it was the beginning of a battle that would be fought with invisible means and would last for hours. During the space of his long silence, Sammy Goldstein had developed a plan.

Now he was in the process of carrying it out

THE MENTO-DUEL

His expression an annoyed one, Scoobey watched the four robots pulling the ray cannon through the sand. The robots were, of course, able to accelerate their pace but then the men would not have been able to follow. The officer thought somewhat painfully of how the attempt to make a lifeboat battle-ready had failed. With some surprise he looked at Murgut, who was leading the group. The native's long legs crossed tirelessly over every unevenness in the ground.

Scoobey was certain that the Green could develop a respectable speed when he had to. Murgut had almost entirely conquered his fear of the desert. He had become familiar with the weapons of Terran spacemen while on board the *MEXICO*. The armament had so impressed him that he was convinced that Terran weaponry would prove a match even for 'Evil embodied'.

Scoobey took a deep breath. The small troop fairly bristled with guns. A locating device was constantly receiving the signals broadcast by Landi's radio. Although they had already calculated the radioman's position, they remained in contact. There was the possibility that Landi's men might have to flee.

Murgut slowed his pace and waited until Scoobey had come alongside. The lamp that had been given him the Green wore from a string tied around his neck. He had told the spacemen that he planned to rent the light out to his fellow Greens – for a certain payment, of course.

"My head hurts," he complained to Scoobey. "And it's getting worse."

"I'm sorry," sympathized the officer, "but with this heat it's not surprising. The doctor will give you something."

Murgut pressed his hands against his temples. His dark eyes were wide with fear. Scoobey waved for Dr. Lewellyn to come over. Before the doctor had quite reached them, the Green began to moan. The gourd-shaped head began to sway from side to side as though mounted on a ball joint.

"Quick, Doc!" cried Scoobey, although he knew that it was relatively difficult to make a diagnosis on alien beings or, for that matter, to even help them at all. A medication that could help a human was not necessarily effective on an extraterrestrial.

“His fear is greater than his pain,” said Lewellyn.

Murgut, who wore the same sort of speaking apparatus as Napoleon, clutched the doctor with one hand and rubbed his forehead with the other. “It’s a demon, Doctor!” he croaked fearfully.

“Nonsense!” Lewellyn contradicted. “We’ve been underway for hours without seeing any of those legendary desert spooks. There aren’t any.”

Unexpectedly, the native sank to the sand. Scoobey glanced uncomfortably at the physician. Lewellyn grasped Murgut by the shoulders and attempted to lift him up. The Green’s entire body trembled.

“Leave me!” he shrieked. “*Evil embodied* will kill me!”

Desperately he ripped himself out of the doctor’s grasp. He pressed himself against the ground as though it offered him protection and aid. His voice shook with panicked terror. “It’s in my head!” Murgut howled. “It’s killing me!”

* * * *

Dr. Morton put his hand against Delaney’s chest. The sergeant stopped. Pentsteven waved his light around.

“Why aren’t we going on?” asked Tanaka quietly.

“That Napoleon has sent us off on a wild goose chase, sure as anything,” Dr. Morton said, his voice edged with frost. “For some reason that only he knows, he lured us away from up there.”

“That poisonous old spider!” muttered Delaney.

A short time later they were back at the place where they had found Napoleon. However, the Green had disappeared. Dr. Morton growled an appropriate curse and interrupted Pentsteven, who was about to launch into a long-winded explanation of his thoughts on the matter.

“We’re going on,” he ordered. “From now on we’ll proceed with utmost...”

A trembling ran through the ship and he went silent.

“What was that?” Fear made Pentsteven’s voice little more than a whisper.

The second vibration was stronger. The trembling was so violent that Dr. Morton had the feeling of standing on a shaking net. Pentsteven held out his arms to keep his balance. Sgt. Delaney supported himself with his hand against the wall. Dr. Morton opened his helmet so that he could hear every sound.

"Let's get out of here," Tanaka suggested. He spoke with a calmness that might better have applied to requesting the departure of the guests at a birthday party. Pentstemon whimpered his agreement.

"And Everson?" asked the doctor. "Are we to leave the others in the lurch? We'll live through a little shaking, I think."

He emphasized his words by continuing over the restless floor. Unseen objects groaned as though subjected to the heaviest strain. Dr. Morton reeled, staggered and swayed along like a spastic. He lit his way purely automatically. He did not look to see if the others were following him. He felt no fear nor even uncertainty. The wave of vibration gradually ebbed. Ghostly noises echoed through the corridors and rooms. Nowhere did he find even a tiny sign of Everson or the men that had disappeared with him. Three other beams of light appeared alongside his. Delaney's voice buzzed in his helmet loudspeaker like an angry insect.

Then came the third jolt. There was a shock that swept the men off their feet and threw them down. Morton thought at first that someone had tripped him but as he ungentily hit the floor he saw that the others had fallen as well. As he tried to stand up again, three further tremendous shocks following in rapid succession so shook the ship that the physician wondered why it didn't break apart. He had fallen on the left side of his ribcage and it hurt considerably.

Dr. Morton told himself that it would be best to stay quiet until the vibrations were over. He didn't want to think of what would happen if the strange shaking were to become even more violent.

* * * *

Sammy Goldstein stood with his back leaning against the wall. In front of him, Everson, Bellinger, Weiss and Sternal tumbled about uncontrollably. The mutant felt the power of the molecular transformite: a constant assault on the mental plane. Napoleon left no stone unturned in his struggle to defeat him. However, Goldstein had been preparing himself for the battle so it had been going well so far. His action had been based on theories whose correctness he had not been able to determine. Till now he had resisted the Greens' radiated energies, fought against them and forced them out of his extra sense. But when the old Green had shown his true face, Goldstein had done an about-face and allowed the paranormal currents of the native brains to flow into him unhindered. Napoleon had already admitted that he, too, suffered from the natives' unconscious paranormal

radiations. The telepath soaked up the thought patterns with full concentration. His suffering brain seemed ready to explode as the uncontrolled paranormal force of the Greens' flowed into it. At first Goldstein had believed that the distance to the village was too much to reach the natives mentally. However, between the ship and the, village, his extra sense came upon some sort of relay station over which he could establish contact. Goldstein could not know that it was Murgut he was using for this purpose.

When the molecular, transformite began the first attack against the mutant, Goldstein immediately and without resistance let him penetrate. He knew that he was lost if his reasoning should prove to be wrong. For some seconds, Napoleon's mental assault robbed him of his consciousness. When he came to again, he was finally sensing the force from the village coming through. He did not take any time to celebrate his triumph, for he did not know if the pseudo-Green would be defeated. Having grown bold, he redoubled his efforts. But Napoleon had blocked his mind. That showed he was not able to best Goldstein in this situation. Nonetheless, Goldstein did not deceive himself. It would not be long before Napoleon would set himself to attempting a second surprise attack. The only defense was the force radiated by the Greens.

When Napoleon attacked again, it happened so that Goldstein did not notice it until it was almost too late. Edward Bellinger stood solidly on his feet once more. Before Goldstein could wonder about it, the Lieutenant had yanked out his thermobeamer and aimed it at the mutant.

"Edward!" cried Goldstein. "Don't do it!"

Bellinger laughed helplessly. He raised the weapon a little. As if in a slow motion movie, Goldstein watched as the officer's finger began to tighten around the trigger. He threw himself forward. A hot beam shot over his back. He twisted desperately around. Then Napoleon attacked him with paranormal force. Fiery lightning flashed before his eyes. In his subconscious he heard Bellinger scream out in terror. Then came the thunder of the weapon Goldstein had the sensation that his skull was expanding like a soap bubble. He had to do something. With his last energy he renewed the connection with the Greens' parawaves. Someone was sobbing. It was himself. He had to leave the place before Napoleon had *everyone* shooting at him. He sprang up and tried to run away. A fearful shock knocked him to the floor. The ship shook in every joint. Goldstein was not sorry, for now the men could hit him only with difficulty if the last living survivor of a strange race forced them to shoot.

A slight feeling of nausea rose up in him. He wanted to cough but his lungs, which were trying to take in air, pressed together. Small circles danced up and down in front of Goldstein's eyes. Stabbing pain raged in his chest. Oxygen starvation, he thought. *He's withdrawing the air from the corridor.*

Once more he struggled against the vibrations. He could now breathe only in short breaths. What was happening to the others? There must be some way out. Someone fell heavily on him. Gasping, Goldstein freed himself. Only now did he hear the indescribable noise of the vibrating ship. He felt infinitely tired. He longed for rest and sleep. His eyelids sank.

With that, Napoleon had won the first round.

* * * *

At first it looked as though there were a shimmering layer of air between the alien spaceship and their current position and that everything beyond it was made to waver slightly. Landi wiped his eyes. "Chancey," he said, "what do you see over there?"

Somewhat lazily, the man addressed stood up and knocked the sand from his spacesuit. Then he looked into the indicated direction. "The thing's shaking," he said excitedly.

The spacemen became aware of the uncanny occurrence.

"What are we waiting for, Tony?" demanded Ogieva, an enormous black. "We've got to get our men out of there before it's too late!"

"Scoobey can't get here very soon," said another. "There's no sense in waiting for him. The Colonel might be fighting it out in there and needing our help."

"No," Landi decided.

He paid no attention to the loud protests and recriminations. Dr. Morton and his three men had not returned, either, and it could be assumed with certainty that yet another group of men would share the unknown fate of the first two. Antonio Landi was a volatile and impulsive man but his feeling of responsibility was stronger. He told himself that it would be better to wait.

"Get in touch with Mr. Scoobey," suggested Ogieva. "Ask him what we should do."

The radioman had no objections to make to that. However, he doubted if the first officer of the *MEXICO* would have an idea that would help them

any. It had been known on Earth that their mission was a risky one. Landi began to wonder if Perry Rhodan would have permitted the search for allies if he had suspected what would happen on Moluk.

He operated the radio device, hoping it would stand up under the new demand on it. His voice was hoarse and excited when Scoobey answered.

“Landi speaking, sir,” said the radioman. “As yet none of the men have returned and we can’t raise them over the helmet radios. For some minutes the alien ship has been shaking like a leaf. The men think we should go find out what became of the commander.”

“Do you have any idea what it could be?” asked Scoobey.

“Not the slightest. It’s shaking back and forth constantly. I can well imagine it isn’t a comfortable place for people to be.”

“Do you consider the situation dangerous?” asked Scoobey.

Landi thought that everything on this planet was a threat to life but aloud he replied: “Not directly, sir.”

“Stay where you are,” instructed the officer. “Don’t undertake anything before my group and I reach you. Should a situation arise in which you fear for the lives of the nine men, then I’ll let you have a free hand. We’re having difficulties too. Murgut the native is with us and seems to be going crazy. Dr. Lewellyn has not been able to help him yet. Over and out.”

Landi switched the device back to the automatic call signal by which Scoobey’s group was orienting itself. It was now up to the radioman when they would follow Everson’s trail. His new power of decision did not make him any happier.

Landi looked over at the source of all their trouble. The trembling had eased somewhat but now he saw something else. Thin clouds of dust hanging low over the ground were moving in their direction. Unless he was mistaken, they seemed to be growing thicker and rising into the air.

“It looks as though we’re going to get another sandstorm,” observed Dealcour. “The wind strength has already picked up.”

“The hurricane will blow us all away,” Landi speculated gloomily. “We’ll lose sight of the ship.”

Landi wanted to do something before it got to that point. He glanced quickly at Ogieva. The black stood, legs apart, in the stand, a mighty figure that would not be troubled by all the storms in the Universe put together. *One’s first idea is always the best*, Landi thought. Aloud he said, “Let’s go.”

He did not have to say where they were going – they all knew.

* * * *

As Dr. Morton forced his aching body back into a standing position, he realized that he had no time in which to be sick. The constant vibrations had died away to the point that one could walk along without fear of being hurled to the floor.

“I’m one solid bruise,” said Sgt. Delaney. “I feel more beaten around and abused than a piece of steak pounded into being tender.”

Even in connection with the sergeant, the thought of steak was cheering to Dr. Morton. He ascertained that Tanaka and Pentsteven had also withstood the torture. Then he turned the beam of his light forwards. He heard Pentsteven groan.

“Take an accounting of your injuries later,” he told the astronomer. “We’re going on.”

That was the sole plan Dr. Morton had for continuing the undertaking. It was, he admitted, rather simple and unimaginative. However, he doubted if anyone would have come to a better idea... even after long consideration.

They went through the corridor, four pain-buckled figures. Each carried a lamp in one hand and with the other felt carefully over the body.

While Dr. Morton wondered if he should call Col. Everson over the helmet radio, a man fell into their circle of light a few meters ahead. He was not wearing a spacesuit.

It was Bellinger. He was in bad shape. His hair was disheveled and the shirt of his uniform was torn. He staggered toward them, moving diagonally from one wall to the other, pushing off with his arms.

The doctor caught Bellinger as he was about to reel on past. The lieutenant did not seem to see him for his eyes stared past Dr. Morton. He tried to push the medic away with a feeble shove. Delaney hurried over to help support the not exactly light man.

“Can you understand me, Ed?” asked Dr. Morton penetratingly. “We want to help you. You must lead us to the others.”

Lt. Bellinger raised his right arm with an unendingly slow motion. He narrowed his eyes as though trying to envision a goal and then bent his index finger, firing an imaginary weapon. With a glance Dr. Morton realized that the spaceman was lacking his thermobeamer.

“There’s been a fight, Ed,” he said pointedly. “Tell us about it.”

Bellinger looked at him for the first time. His eyes widened somewhat. He trembled violently. "I shot and killed the boy!" he exclaimed.

Then he collapsed and the two men could hold him on his feet only with effort. While not being a conspicuously courageous man, Dr. Morton was no coward. Still, the lieutenant's words sent a chill down his spine. "Do you mean Goldstein?" he asked.

But Bellinger had suffered such a severe shock that he could no longer speak rationally.

Unconsciously, Dr. Morton stood up straight. "Try to get out of the ship and into the open with him," he told Pentsteven. "Don't stop for anything."

The astronomer nodded, his face pale, but certainly he was glad for the opportunity to leave the alien ship. *The escape will hardly be pleasant with poor Bellinger on his hands*, the doctor thought.

"We'll search farther," he said. "Everson can't be far away now. It's possible that we'll be drawn into a fight. We'll act accordingly."

He drew his shock pistol. For a brief moment its barrel caught the light from Tanaka's lamp and reflected it brightly.

If there's only one shape changer here, thought the bearded man, *then this weapon is about as effective as a pea-shooter.*

* * * *

A human – even if he is a mutant – cannot simultaneously struggle for air, keep his balance amid constant vibrations and repulse a super-being whose paranormal power is almost inexhaustible. The natives' parawaves were no longer enough to hold Napoleon back. Crouching on the floor, Goldstein felt his control of his own mental faculties fading away.

Napoleon's face appeared in his mind. The Green smiled. His head swayed somewhat from side to side. It looked as though an old man was thoughtfully shaking his head to show his disapproval of misbehaving children.

It was not my intention to fight you with such ruthlessness, the molecular transformite told him telepathically, *but your conduct forced me to extreme measures. Your reasoning should have told you that any resistance was useless.*

Goldstein's telepathic feelers could no longer take hold of the Green's radiation. His enemy now had him completely in his power. With growing terror, the mutant realized that soon he would again be a helpless tool,

carrying out all orders and acting at Napoleon's whim.

He lay there, overcome by exhaustion and hopelessness. Everson, Weiss and Sternal had collapsed into unconsciousness. Goldstein had only to stretch out his arm to touch the commander.

It would be best if we left the ship together, said Napoleon once more. It is not in good condition. I had to activate a few devices which could lead to a catastrophe. I was forced to do so by your obstinacy. I needed time to adjust myself to the mental pressure that you were concentrating in your mind and relaying on to me. The idea was not bad but in the long run you could not stand up against me. Since I could not seize you mentally, I first overcame you physically. When we go out now, a storm will be underway which will prevent your friends from attempting any uncautious acts. They will have enough to do staying on their feet. When I have put them one after the other under my control, the wind will die down and we can go back to your spaceship. I'll have enough time until it's flightworthy again to pick out the most docile members of the crew. With their help, I'll then take off. The others will be left behind on Moluk. They can busy themselves with the primitive natives and their further development.

Goldstein did not ask to which group he belonged. No matter which side from which one looked at it, the prospect of spending the rest of one's life among the Greens was not especially cheering. Even so, it seemed better to him than mental enslavement aboard the *MEXICO*. He did not dare think of what the shape changer had in mind for the Terran cruiser. Napoleon's action was piracy, according to the laws of the Solar Imperium, but there was no one who could punish him for it.

Once again the telepath tried to concentrate on the Greens' parawaves. However, no sooner had he thought about it than pain spread out in his brain and he became incapable of using his paranormal powers. Napoleon had paralyzed the relevant section of his brain with a psychoblock. The mutant's force of will was not enough to do anything against it. His extra senses were involuntarily crippled systems that refused to perform any function.

"I hope you've finally convinced yourself of the uselessness of your experiments," said Napoleon aloud. "You'll save yourself hard measures from my side that way. After all, I wouldn't want to leave you behind on Moluk, a mental wreck."

Everson came to preventing Goldstein from making a dangerously sarcastic reply. The Colonel sat up with difficulty and somewhat uncertainly got to his feet. Goldstein looked up at him and smiled wanly.

"It doesn't look good, does it?" Everson inquired.

"No sir," said Goldstein, indicating Napoleon. "He wants to go out with us now. He only led us around in here so that he could get me under his control. And now he's done it."

In a single smooth motion, the Colonel ripped out his thermobeamer and fired. Goldstein would have sworn that no being could have reacted at that speed.

However, the glowing beam that the mutant had expected did not come.

"Don't be a fool," warned Napoleon. "There'll be no more of that."

Everson shrugged and shoved his weapon back. He glanced down at Goldstein. "I only wanted to try it," he murmured.

He gently prodded Weiss and Sternal with the tips of his boots. The biologist grumbled something. Ten minutes later, they were all on their feet. Bellinger had disappeared. Goldstein decided not to mention the lieutenant's unsuccessful attempt at shooting him. Without a doubt, the man had been under Napoleon's influence.

"You can put your spacesuits back on," said Napoleon, his tone friendly. "I will accompany you. Reaching for your weapons is useless. They aren't usable."

At that moment a small, stocky man in a spacesuit appeared at the other end of the corridor. His helmet was open and a bearded face could be made out inside. He held a weapon in his hand.

"Hello, Doc," said Everson.

Dr. Morton stretched to look past the commander at Napoleon. He put his light back in its case, for the area was now brightly lit. Sgt Delaney and Eiji Tanaka appeared behind him. When they saw Everson and the others, their faces showed relief.

The doctor pushed past Everson and trained his thermobeamer on Napoleon. His cheeks grew red with anger.

"Doc," said Everson, "I think there are some things I'd better tell you before you get us all into trouble."

* * * *

Antonio Landi would never have believed that 100 meters would be a distance it would require him more than a few minutes to traverse. When they had gone a third of the way, the ship was already hidden in clouds of

dust and sand. They had to march against the wind and the radioman had the unpleasant feeling that they were being blown three steps back for every step they took forward. He knew that the other men were struggling on with the same senseless obstinacy without doing any better than he was. Landi had become a machine moving his legs in silent resignation, although he was aware of being in motion. Sand and dust pattered against him, swirled around his suit, flooded about him like water. He bent into the wind as though it were a solid wall. With all his strength he strained forward, step by step, with one free arm paddling wildly against the thrust.

Then something came towards him out of the gloom. He squinted so that he could see better.

It was a man in a spacesuit. Landi waved. They finally met and stopped. A third man appeared, crouching through the maelstrom towards them.

"Everything alright?" asked the man next to Landi.

Landi recognized the rich, manly voice at once. "Sir!" he stammered. "How did you get here?"

"You might say the wind blew us," said the Colonel. "The others are right behind me."

As though to confirm his words, some shapeless silhouettes appeared in the walls of sand. Landi could have shouted loudly in sheer relief. "What happened?" he asked. "Did everything go well, sir?"

Some time went by before the commander answered. "Napoleon is a shape changer. At the moment he has the upper hand. His target is the *MEXICO*."

Landi, who also had been aboard the guppy whose crew had fallen under the influence of Mataal, felt his joy transformed into alarm. "What should we do now, sir?" he asked lowly.

He knew the answer even before the Colonel pronounced it. They didn't have even the ghost of a chance against this creature. Once luck and chance had come to their help. Luck is a rare thing and repeats itself only infrequently. The radioman would have liked to believe that they would overcome all dangers. However, reality looked as though they were at an end.

Amid the raging elements, the spaceman became aware that any hope for rescue was only self-deception.

8.

END OF THE RACE

The call signal had died. Three hours before, it had sounded hesitantly a few times, then finally it went silent altogether. Walt Scoobey wondered if the dark clouds visible on the horizon in the distance had anything to do with it. It was undoubtedly a mass of dust being driven into the air by a storm. The bad weather was evidently taking place where their goal lay. In vain the First Officer tried to tell himself that nothing was happening to the expedition. He hoped that they would have reached Landi's position before the next two hours had passed. Whether they would then encounter the men was a question that Walt Scoobey did not dare try to answer.

They were making good progress. Murgut's strange attack had passed. The native had recovered nicely after having been given an injection by Dr. Lewellyn. Now he was more convinced than ever that the weapons of his friends were mightier than all the sprits of the desert put together. He stared respectfully again and again at the ray cannon being transported by the robots.

No spaceship hull not protected by energy screens could hold up under an attack by this weapon. Scoobey wondered if the effect on ghosts and demons would be as impressive as the effect to which one was accustomed on solid matter.

* * * *

The storm had ebbed to the point that the spacemen could stand upright. The area gradually grew light again. Napoleon kept away from the group. He gave his orders telepathically to Goldstein, who had to pass them on.

Two attempts at attacking the molecular transformite had failed miserably. Napoleon had announced drastic punishments should there be a third attempt. Goldstein guessed that the false Green was now in the act of putting them all one after the other under his mental control. Once he had done that, they were irretrievably lost. Ogieva, Bellinger, Dealcour and various others already presented such an apathetic aspect that the mutant suspected they were already mastered by Napoleon. Goldstein had long given up trying to resist the telepathic orders. The last molecular transformite was able to shrug off any action on the part of the mutant.

They moved slowly through the dying wind, 30 depressed Terrans and one long-legged being whose true shape only a few men could imagine.

Goldstein did not take note of the time that passed by during their slow march. It was purely meaningless when they reached the *MEXICO*. The sun reappeared at some point during the march. It was already low over the horizon.

The desert was quiet again and there was nothing to indicate that a hurricane had blown over it just a few hours before. Goldstein's body hurt in different places. A feeling of paralysis was spreading in the arm he had injured during the crash of the *MEXICO*. A glance at the others showed the mutant that not one of them was in good shape. Bellinger had to be supported by two men. Pentstevens, the young astronomer, dragged his right leg behind him.

The mutant looked at Everson. Even if he had wanted to, he would not have been able to pick up the commander's thoughts.

Just as Goldstein was about to glance down at the ground, a dark spot appeared on a distant dune ahead. Soon a second appeared. Before Goldstein could say anything, there was an entire group.

Scoobey and his men!

I've already seen them, said Napoleon in his mind. *They can't help you.*

Without stopping, the two groups moved toward each other. Goldstein noticed the robots pulling a ray cannon. He smiled painfully. The size of the weapon was utterly meaningless. A surprise was in store for Scoobey.

Then Goldstein saw the Green. He walked behind Scoobey's men, his long legs moving over the sand in the inimitable style of his race. It was probably Murgut. The mutant gradually became aware of who had served as a mental relay station for him.

A thought shot through his mind like lightning. Wasn't it possible that Napoleon's paranormal power would be weakened by the proximity of the native? Goldstein tried desperately to take hold of the native's thought pattern. Nothing happened. The shape changer had done his work carefully and not left the mutant any chances.

They were still 50 meters apart when Scoobey's voice sounded in their receivers. "It looks as though we went to all our trouble for nothing, sir," he said happily. "I hope that your expedition was successful."

Everson explained to him what *kind* of success they'd had. He had to bring all his ability in convincing argument to bear to convince the officer of the

senselessness of an attack.

After awhile Murgut moved to go greet his assumed compatriot

Keep him away from me! Napoleon ordered telepathically.

Although everything in Goldstein struggled against it, he could not refuse to obey the order. Every nerve fiber in him fought the mental pressure from the molecular transformite. His head seemed like a buzzing beehive. But his legs moved him toward Murgut in order to cut him off from Napoleon.

Faster! came the mental command.

Goldstein knew that it was wrong but he began to run. He raced across the sand to catch up with Murgut. Meanwhile, an odd chain of thought was forming in his mind. The closer the Green came to his false friend, the weaker Napoleon's pressure on the mutant's power of decision became. In return, the Green's parawaves were intensifying. Now Goldstein ran of his own volition. As he ran, he drew his gun. But he had underestimated Napoleon. Now, when the being had begun to lose control over him, Napoleon fell back on other methods. Directly in front of the mutant, a fountain of sand spewed into the air with enough force to tear the head off a bull. A jump backwards brought Goldstein to safety. He had no time to see if the others involved themselves in the struggle. Murgut marched unsuspectingly towards Napoleon. Then the shape changer began to flee.

Goldstein's eyes were sealed shut with sweat. He fired without aiming. "It's a demon!" he cried to Murgut. In his excitement he had called out in English. Quickly he repeated himself so that the native could understand.

The molecular transformite stumbled and fell. Murgut reached him first. The mutant did not dare shoot for fear of hitting the Green. Horrified, he watched Murgut help the enemy to his feet. How could he explain to the Green that Napoleon was an enemy? Goldstein called on the last reserves of energy in his body. A huge hole formed in the sand in front of him. He stumbled and almost fell in. Only the inaccuracy of the malicious attack had saved him. He ran around the crater. His terrified eyes watched the sand between him and the molecular transformite begin to rise. Like a gigantic wave, it rolled towards him. In spite of the Green's immediate proximity, the molecular transformite could still influence matter as he wished.

"Duck, Sammy!" shouted a voice in his helmet loudspeaker.

He threw himself down, expecting at any moment to be buried under a wall of sand. Something hissed hot and angrily over him. He raised his head cautiously. The artificial wall had come to a halt. With effort, Goldstein

scrambled over it.

Murgut knelt before the motionless figure of the last member of a very strange race. The shot from a thermoweapon had oddly changed Napoleon. He no longer looked thin and fragile. The wrinkles of his face had smoothed out. He was half-buried in sand but that which the mutant could see no longer had anything in common with a Green.

In death Napoleon had assumed his true form.

Someone slowly came up to Goldstein's side. It was Col. Everson.

"Who fired the shot?" asked the mutant softly.

"A robot," answered Everson quietly.

Together they drew Murgut away from the corpse. Now that the battle was over, Goldstein felt no triumph. Even the thought that in a few days they would return unhindered to the Earth in the *MEXICO* could not pull him out of his depressed mood.

END

The world by which they were now surrounded gave them an eerie feeling. They were familiar with the wide open spaces of the universe or the inhospitable surfaces of other worlds but rarely ventured into the deep regions of oceans. Although deepsea cruises in land-sea-air transporters had been part of their training they had assumed they would spend all their time in the comfort of a spaceship and never seriously contemplated a life underwater.

As soon as they entered the water the observer had detected small semi-metallic objects moving in the vicinity of the ship. The way they moved indicated that they must be steered. Untcher tried to contact them with the short-range intercom but received no answer.

The unidentified boats finally left as if they had been suddenly called back. What happens next is part of the exciting plot of –

ENEMY IN THE DARK

by Kurt Mahr